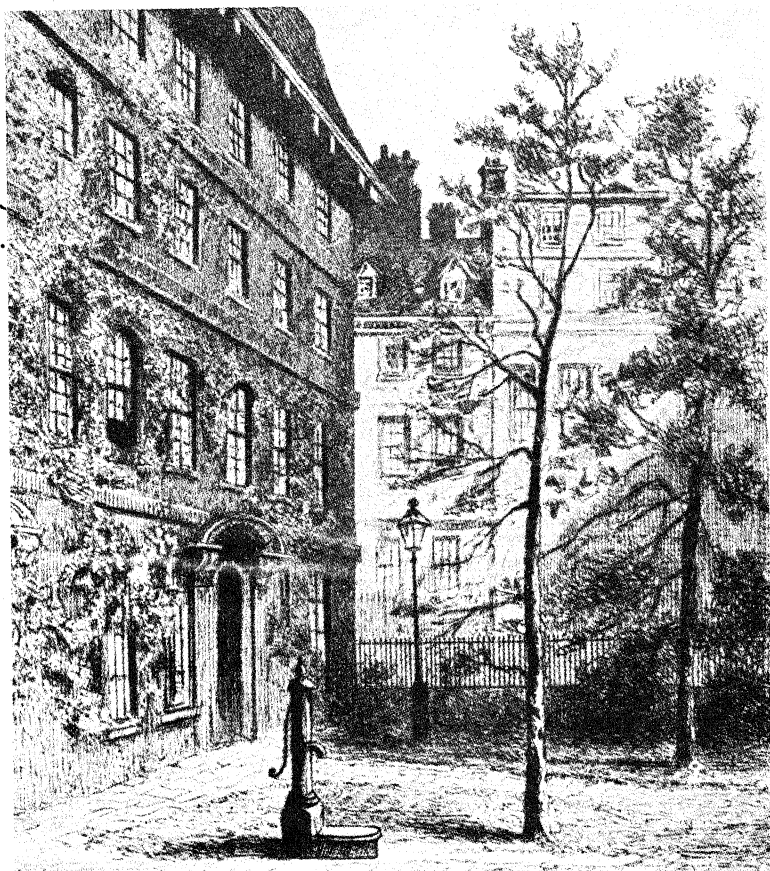


## THE LAMBS

To  
ELIZABETH SAGE HARE





COURTYARD OF THE INNER TEMPLE  
Where Charles and Mary Lamb were born

# THE LAMBS

*A Study of  
Pre-Victorian England*

BY

KATHARINE ANTHONY

LONDON

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## CHAPTER I

### *Lowly Born*

THE Temple has long stood like a wrinkle of age on the face of the city. Even as far back as the year 1764—the year with which this story begins—it was regarded as a monument of London's antiquity. Then and for long afterwards—in fact, until World War II destroyed a part of the immemorial pile—it has stood as an indestructible symbol of the nation's great age and long history.

It then formed a shut-in world surrounded by a Chinese wall of its own. Architecturally it stood aside from the rest of London; it was governed by its own laws and used a legal language heard nowhere else. The sunshine fell with a special sparseness in the courtyards and on the terraces, while dark walks which never saw the sun's rays led to secret enclosures. The sundials, tombstones, and terrace steps seemed to grow out of the earth on which they had reposed so long. Only the sparrows and the ivy suggested that life still renewed itself within this stone and mortar monument of the past.

For centuries the Temple has been identified with the institution of the law. Under a worldly Henry VIII it passed from religious to legal hands. Retaining its cloistral atmosphere, it became a monastery for barristers. By the skilful methods of their profession, the lawyers acquired the Temple property for practically nothing and converted it to their own use, with all its churchly privileges, special rights, and exemptions retained. The tenants in their black gowns and wigs seemed not so different from the religious Templars as might have been expected or perhaps desired. They received their clients in the ancient church, among the images of saints and Crusaders and stained-glass windows. Many a tough customer must have been surprised to find himself welcomed in these hallowed surroundings. A somewhat monk-like atmosphere prevailed in the lawyers' institution, where sacredness and worldliness found ample room to dwell side by side.

Around the middle of the eighteenth century there resided in the ancient Temple one Mr. Samuel Salt, a typical member of the legal fraternity. Mr. Salt possessed considerable prominence in the social and political life of his day. He figured as a successful practitioner of the law, attaining the highest dignity of his profession, that of a Bencher in the Temple; and he also sat for several terms as a member of Parliament. Besides all this, he served as director and governor of some thirty boards and corporations. Consequently Mr. Salt was a man of much business and a centre of much quiet personal influence.

In politics Mr. Salt was a Whig. One may assume from this and from other circumstances of his life that he was a man of democratic principles. Like most Whigs of his age, he believed that people should content themselves in the station to which God had called them, though he shrewdly observed that they were all pretty much the same under the skin. A man of culture and kindness and withal an agreeable specimen of his class was the said Mr. Salt.

His most marked peculiarity was his sustained persistence in the single state. Yet he was not actually a bachelor, but a widower of such long standing that he had acquired the reputation of being unmarried. The legend ran that Mr. Salt, as a sensitive young husband, had lost his wife in childbed and had been so affected by his loss that he had ever afterwards abjured matrimony. He was nevertheless a good liver, a frequent diner-out, and the recipient of flattering attentions from the ladies. It may be that he simply preferred the comforts and conveniences of a settled bachelorhood to the uncertainties of a second marriage.

Mr. Salt mixed politics with society in the best manner of his class. By maintaining social connexions with preferred stock society and wealthy county families he could always exert an influence without over-troubling himself. He was to all appearances an easy-going man. His only other marked peculiarity was that in consequence of remaining single he maintained his tenancy of the Temple chambers for practically all his life.

Like all gentlemen of his rank, Mr. Salt kept a valet. It has been said that no man is a hero to his valet, but Mr. Salt was an exception to the rule. It happened, however, that he was no hero to the son of his valet. Charles Lamb's portrait of

Samuel Salt reduces his character to a minimum. The shy Bencher in leading-strings in *The Essays of Elia* is hardly the adequate portrait of a man who survived as a successful lawyer and politician. However, this surely not unusual English gentleman would scarcely have been remembered until now but for the accident that his valet was the father of the gifted Charles Lamb.

## 2

At a comparatively early stage of his life Samuel Salt took into his employ a small, lively, able young man by the name of John Lamb. It was the beginning of a master-and-man relationship that was to last all their lives. Samuel Salt and John Lamb were genuine friends. One can imagine the egregious puns that were made in that day of punning on the Salt and Lamb combination. Though widely separated in station, both were superior specimens of their kind and respected each other as such. Squire and servant, they clove to each other loyally till death at last parted them.

John Lamb, who was twenty-one when he entered Salt's employ, had previously been a footman in the glittering city of Bath. His prospects as footman had been affected by the law against public gambling which had been clapped down on that city in 1745. A host of gentlemen and servants had fallen along with the great Beau Nash. An enterprising character, which our young man assuredly was, would naturally have turned to fresh pastures soon after this. In fact, he enters our history by becoming the employee of Samuel Salt in the very next year.

Salt's servant had already developed what might be called his philosophy of life. He had lived in the most vivacious city of England during its greatest glamour and elegance. Here he had learned not to take life too seriously and to consider mirth and amusement as among the legitimate aims of mankind. Where he got the elementary education on which his philosophy was based has not been handed down to us. But it is certain that he was not a Puritan by nature, and, it is probable, not by training. The Bath footman owned and read Butler's *Hudibras* and Steele's *Guardian* and cultivated the writing of satiric verse. He evidently possessed a more cultured background than his humble employment would suggest. The facts might



have been once ascertained by his son's biographers, for John Lamb had married sisters living in London and they must have left a line of descendants. But dull fact-finding was beneath the dignity of the biographers of early days. All that we know positively is that John Lamb was a young man with a surprising amount of education for a servant when he entered Salt's employ.

A reserved and sedate personality, Mr. Salt probably liked a cheerful domestic about him, especially one whose high spirits and good fun did not interfere with the respect he owed his master. For the valet had acquired in Bath, along with his philosophy of merry living, the chief of all virtues in the English servant, faithfulness to his betters. Charles Lamb afterwards averred that John Lamb was a man of incorruptible zeal and honesty.

For quite a long period of time—somewhere around fifteen years—the Whig lawyer and his valet jogged along comfortably together. Salt's laziness converted Lamb into a valued factotum, and though he was, strictly speaking, only a valet, Lamb functioned as a lawyer's clerk and scrivener. His son says that he helped Salt with his law cases. In time Lamb was additionally employed, at Salt's instigation no doubt, as waiter in the Benchers' dining-room of the Inner Temple. In this capacity he served acceptably and became in due time the head waiter. An intelligent, quick fellow, industrious, assiduous, he thrived under the Benchers' patronage and seemed, at the age of thirty-six, to be settling down into a successful imitation of his master's bachelor life. He alternated between Salt's private chambers and the Benchers' Commons like a jolly lay brother among the legal prelates of the Temple.

Then in the year 1761—the year in which his early idol, the gallant Beau Nash, was gathered to his fathers—John Lamb suddenly took unto himself a wife. His choice was a country girl. The marriage probably came about in this wise.

## 3

Mr. Salt frequently visited at the homes of county families. On such visits he was naturally attended by his servant. One of his friends, Mr. William Plumer, a fellow Whig and Parliament member, maintained a fine ancestral seat called Blakes-

ware, near Widford, in Hertfordshire. The Plumers were rich gentlefolk and lived in splendid style in a grand old Jacobean house. The housekeeper, Mrs. Elizabeth Field, of whom her grandson afterwards said: 'If she had a failing, 'twas that she respected her master's family too much', had visible reasons for her great respect. Mrs. Field had an only daughter, also Elizabeth, and it was this daughter whom John Lamb married in 1761. In attending Samuel Salt on his visits to the Plumers, the valet had met his fate on the Blakesware backstairs.

The courtship would have been brief, for the journey from London to Widford was long and could not be often repeated. It would also have lacked no item of romance. John Lamb's poetic sense would not have neglected his supreme opportunity. The wedding, which took place in the spring, would have been very gay and pretty. In John Lamb's poem 'The Sparrow's Wedding' he introduced a deal of fluttering and twittering on the day of the nuptials. At any rate, the union was approved by the respective employers and the marriage took place without separating the bridegroom from the Temple.

The bride, Elizabeth Field, was a shadowy person and was destined to remain a shadowy person. To this day almost nothing is known of her. Her son, Charles Lamb, wrote that she was tall and handsome and bore a striking resemblance to Mrs. Siddons. But no one has confirmed this. She was taller than her husband and about ten years younger than he. She laid some strange claim to a gentility outranking her husband's. To all appearances John Lamb and Elizabeth Field were equals. What her real character was—whether she was bright or stupid, talented or humdrum, educated or otherwise—is something now impossible to know. There is a strong suggestion that she did not love her two younger children, that she loved only her eldest. In general, she remains a mere outline, without substance or essence, with no more personality than the ancestors in a typical genealogy.

The beneficent Mr. Salt expanded his establishment to include his valet's family. The Lambs were installed in a set of Temple chambers beneath those he occupied. Here they lived through sickness and health, through childbirths and child-buryings, through storm and shine, for the next thirty years. Mr. Salt continued in his bachelor establishment above, while below seven children were born and crowded into the equivalent

space. Four of them were scarcely baptized before they were carried out to the Temple Churchyard. Only three lived to grow to maturity in the cramped, slumlike quarters. The youngest child was so rickety that he was actually lame, a palpable disfigurement that he never outgrew. If disharmony prevailed in the household, as it did, this condition of congested existence only served to increase it.

Yet a stable family life, based on a reasonable security of life's necessities, continued on in the Lambs' narrow chambers. The bond seems to have borne a considerable pressure of spiritual disorder. The presence in the family of John Lamb's elder sister, Sarah Lamb, became a source of daily friction. Aunt Sarah, or Aunt Hetty as she was called by the Lamb children, was not a total burden, for she had a small annuity and paid board to her brother. But Sarah Lamb and her sister-in-law habitually disagreed 'They made each other miserable for full twenty years of their lives', wrote Mary Lamb afterwards. The children naturally took sides in the domestic conflict. One needs no actual data to infer that the husband and brother, John Lamb, a modeller in wax, a satiric versifier, a playboy by temperament, was helpless between the two women. Looking backward, Mary Lamb declared that the strain had been unnecessary. 'A little frankness and looking into each other's character at first would have spared all this, and they would have lived as they did, fond of each other for the last ten years of their lives' One may be allowed to doubt a little the great harmony of this Indian summer. At any rate it came too late to help the growing children. In the words of a notable psychiatrist, the home had been 'the usual, unhappy, strife-stricken atmosphere in which the delinquent grows up'.

## 4

The three Lamb children who survived infancy were all unusually gifted. It is interesting to speculate what the other four might have become if they had lived. The entire seven were baptized and christened in the Round Church of the Temple. John Lamb, the eldest, was born in 1763, in the same year as the Prince of Wales, the future turbulent Regent, who was to outlive him by several years. John was eighteen months older than Mary Anne, who was born on the 3rd of

December 1764. That was the year in which Hogarth died. Charles, the next surviving child and the youngest of the Lambs' progeny, was born on the 10th of February 1775. Oliver Goldsmith had just been buried in the Temple Churchyard. John and Mary Anne Lamb must have seen Goldsmith often in the Temple and have been impressed by his funeral, attended by the great Burke and Reynolds.

Anything more alien to childhood than the environment in which the Lamb children grew up can hardly be imagined. They could venture upon the terraces provided that, on the approach of a Benchman, they could render themselves invisible. They could play in the churchyard, learning to read from the tombstones, if they could do it silently. Mary Lamb used this experience afterwards in a short story. Little Charles, under her tutelage, learned his alphabet from the gravestones before he could speak. It was Charles who, out of his accumulated acquaintance with gravestones, one day asked his sister: 'Mary, where are all the naughty people buried?' Toys they knew only from the toy-shop windows. The roar of the lions in the Tower hard by satisfied their most natural childish interest.

But as long as their father continued secure in his position as waiter, or 'pannier', as he was called, they were fairly happy little Cockneys. About the time of Charles's birth, John Lamb was advanced to the place of first waiter. According to the tales and essays of Charles Lamb, the pannier's family fared well as to food. His Aunt Sarah embarrassed them all at the table one day by saying to a guest: 'Do take another slice, Mr. Billet, for you do not get pudding every day.' Aunt Sarah also boldly carried viands from the Temple to her nephew while he attended Christ's Hospital. This was the extra fare which Coleridge, a hungry fellow pupil, so bitterly begrudged him. Young Charles thus acquired early in life a connoisseur's palate that he never lost.

There were other valued perquisites of their father's position. Mr. Salt allowed them free access to his library. Mary Lamb, according to Charles, 'was tumbled early, by accident or design, into a spacious closet of good old English reading, without much selection or prohibition, and browsed at will upon that fair and wholesome pasturage'. Her brothers were tumbled into the same storehouse. The young Lambs were childish

enough to select books with pictures and with contents that read like stories. Joseph Glanvil's *Witches and Witchcraft*, Stackhouse's *History of the Holy Bible*, and Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* formed their favourite reading. Nothing more cheerful or entertaining was to be found on Mr. Salt's bookshelves. One would have searched in vain for Shakespeare's plays. The cultured world still waited for these same Cockney children to grow up and teach it that Shakespeare's plays are delightful and amusing literature.

The Lamb children went to school early. Either Mr. Salt or John Lamb saw to that. They attended a day-school in Fetter Lane, a dingy, one-room building in a rear court, with sloping desks and leaden inkwells, conducted by the 'Eminent Writer and Teacher of Languages and Mathematics, William Bird'. 'I well remember Bird', said Charles Lamb forty-five years afterwards. Lamb must needs have become very famous in the meanwhile to speak so familiarly of the imposing person who had presided over his schooldays. In his recollections Bird lingered as a mild-mannered, heavily-built man, wrapped in a gorgeous Indian dressing-gown, a favourite costume with schoolmasters of the period. Lamb remembered him furthermore as 'something of a gentleman', and, what is of much more importance, as 'a humane and judicious master in the main'. Exceptional schoolmaster that he was, his only famous pupils were the pannier's children from the Temple. Bird's 'eminent writings' have unfortunately not been preserved. But they must have given him an aura not unappreciated by the quaint little wiseacres from the Temple.

Mary Lamb did not go to school as early as her brothers. It is not on record that John Lamb the younger attended Mr. Bird's academy; but at the tender age of six he had been prepared for Christ's Hospital in some primary school, and it was probably Mr. Bird's. Little Charles was certainly introduced to Mr. Bird's discipline at the age of six. Mary's formal schooling was an afterthought. In her own words, she was a 'big girl' when she went to Bird's school for instruction. Her spelling and her grammar had already settled into an imperfect state which always afterwards defied complete rehabilitation. Fortunately Charles, who had been one of Bird's best grammarians and spellers, remained always close at hand to prevent Mary's weakness from becoming too prominent.

Just why Mary Lamb and sundry other girls were admitted to this temple of learning is not quite clear. She was one of a class of 'young ladies' regularly instructed in the afternoons after the boys had been finished off in the mornings. That a day-school for girls flourished in the London of that date seems surprising. The education of girls was still a delicate and private matter. The only radical intellectuals among the women of the time were the hostesses known as the Blue-stockings, social leaders who had introduced literary conversation instead of card-playing in their drawing-rooms. Some vague influence emanating from the Bluestocking group may have touched the humbler portions of London. Mary's schoolfellows could not have been ladies, or they would have been taught in boarding-schools or at home by governesses. It is baffling to know that Mr. Bird's group passed out of existence with Mary Lamb as its only representative to leave a mark on her time.

The great adventure of the school for Mary was the enjoyment, for the first time in her life, of the society of girls of her own age. She had her first taste of youthful companionship. The girls were not backward in adopting the practices of the day-school boys. They led their special instructor, one Benjamin Starkey, a sad life. 'If any of the girls,' wrote Mary in after years, 'who were my schoolfellows, should be reading through their aged spectacles, tidings . . . of their youthful friend, Starkey, they will feel a pang, as I do, at ever having teased his gentle spirit' The harassed teacher at last ran away. But he was caught and brought back by his father, who by the laws of 1775 owned him and had apprenticed him firmly to schoolmaster Bird. 'The girls,' said Mary, 'his tormentors, in pity for his case, for the rest of the day forebore to annoy him.'

Mary's good times, even though at the expense of this poor martyr, are pleasant to contemplate. She shared a life in the school that might have saved her from much ultimate suffering had it only lasted long enough. The few months that she spent under Mr. Bird—the only schooling she ever had, by the way—left a strong trace on her mind and character. It wove a thread in her wayward fate that was not easily broken and that followed perceptibly along through the pattern of her years.

After he had known Christ's Hospital, Charles Lamb was prone to look down upon the advantages of Mr Bird's teaching. But for Mary it was heaven to learn the rudiments and be taught like the boys. The high light of her schooling was a performance of Addison's *Cato*, given by the older boys. The players were coached by the girls' teacher, Starkey, and the girls were allowed to look on.

## 5

Both of Mary's brothers were enrolled in Christ's Hospital. This opportunity was opened to them by scholarships, which they received through Samuel Salt's influence. Mr. Salt was one of the Hospital's governors. First John and then Charles Lamb passed eight years in the historic foundation. For Mary there was unfortunately no such possibility. After Mr. Bird came dreary retirement to housework and needlework and immurement within the dull walls of the Inner Temple tenement.

When John Lamb donned the Bluecoat, his father signed his petition, and Samuel Salt's name appeared as sponsor. Charles's petition, presented twelve years later, was signed by his mother, Elizabeth Lamb, and Timothy Yeats appeared as his sponsor. Mr. Yeats is known to have been a friend of Salt's. There must have been some reason for the change. Perhaps the Benchers hoped that the second petition would not be recognized as coming from him and from the same family. One biographer has suggested that it may have been unusual for Christ's Hospital to favour one family twice in this way. Some reason must also be found for the fact that John Lamb's connexion with the school was never spoken of by Charles or his acquaintances. That he too was a Christ's Hospital boy is a recent discovery of literary research. He remained, however, a Bluecoat for eight years, and was no doubt a creditable scholar. It seems odd that this item should have escaped notice so long in all the volumes that have been written about the Lambs.

Charles Lamb's life in Christ's Hospital is fully described in his writings. A tiny boy of seven, he was clothed in the Bluecoat uniform with knee-breeches and long yellow stockings. The bared heads of the Hospital boys further distinguished them from the topped lads at Eton. For eight years Charles had no other life than that of his school. He fulfilled his duties

to the extent of becoming a Deputy Grecian—this being next to the highest rank in the school, that of Grecian. He always cherished the belief that, but for his unfortunate stammer, he would have been a Grecian, a student trained cost-free at a university to become a clergyman. It is possible that, aside from his stammer, there were other reasons that unfitted him for the Grecian dignity. The Lamb family of the Inner Temple might have been too well known by this time to be looked on as promising material for the production of a clergyman.

Charles's elevation to the rank of a Bluecoat did not fail of its impression on the womenfolk at home. He was to write some lines on the memory dedicated to his Aunt Sarah.

*I have not forgot  
The busy joy on that important day . .  
How thine eye perused him round and round,  
And hardly knew him in his yellow coats,  
Red leathern belt, and gown of russet blue!*

In another poem, 'A Sister's Expostulation on the Brother's Learning Latin', he indicates that Mary had been envious of his scholarship.

*Shut these odious books up, brother—  
They have made you quite another  
Thing from what you used to be—  
Once you lik'd to play with me—  
Now you leave me all alone,  
And are so conceited grown  
With your Latin, you'll scarce look  
Upon any English book. .  
Rather than we will fall out [replied the brother],  
If our parents will agree  
You shall Latin learn from me.*

It seems then that Mary learned some Latin from her brother Charles, as she had already, in all probability, learned some from her brother John. With two brothers in Christ's Hospital, who came home for frequent holidays, she early acquired some erudition at second hand. She afterwards said that she had taught herself Latin, which probably means that she attacked it more seriously later on in life.

The headmaster of Charles Lamb's school was the notable James Boyer. Boyer was the bewigged schoolmaster of Elizabethan tradition, who for some unexplained reason always



carried a carpenter's rule in the pocket of his black gown. He became a historic English pedagogue, who should be ranked along with Roger Ascham and Thomas Arnold. Unlike Arnold and Ascham, however, he built better than he knew with humble material. He travailed mightily, sparing neither rod nor abuse, little dreaming that the fruit he tended was one day to fall so ripe, so perfect, and so beautiful to the English ground. The gipsy-dark, wild-eyed Charles Lamb, the slack-mouthed, high-browed Samuel Coleridge, and the ethereal-looking Leigh Hunt were all to be the proofs of his tutorial skill.

Coleridge gives us this description of Boyer's training methods: 'At the same time that we were studying Greek tragic poets, he made us read Shakespeare and Milton as lessons: and they were the lessons too, which required most time and trouble to bring up so as to escape his censure. . . . In our own English compositions . . . he showed no mercy to phrase, metaphor, or image, unsupported by sound sense, or where the same sense might have been conveyed with equal force and dignity in plainer words. *Lute, harp, and lyre, Muse, Muses, and inspirations, Pegasus, Parnassus, and Hippocrene*, were all an abomination to him. In fancy I can almost hear him now exclaiming, "Harp? Harp? Lyre? Pen and ink, boy, you mean! Muse, boy, Muse? Your nurse's daughter, you mean! Pierian Spring? Oh, aye! The cloister-pump, I suppose!"'

It was an original teacher in that age who, while forcing Greek and Latin down young Englishmen's throats, taught them that equal discipline was required for the mastering of their own tongue. It was also unprecedented to look backward over the heads of Burke, Pope, and Johnson, the reigning idols of the time, and point to the true gods of English literature, Shakespeare and Milton. Boyer's real service was to teach the beauty, grace, and charm of simple and unstrained language in a Johnsonian age. It is possible to trace the influence of his courage in the essays of Lamb and Leigh Hunt and in the poetry of Coleridge.

## 6

The cultural atmosphere of the Lambs' own fireside must have been pretty Hogarthian. They lived gaily and simply. Mrs. Lamb, a maidservant related to farmer-folk, left no indica-

tion that she was educated above her class. All that we positively know of her is that she could sign her name. The late E. V. Lucas, the distinguished authority on the Lambs, mentions this in his biography of Charles Lamb, noting that Mrs. Lamb signed her son's petition for entrance to Christ's Hospital. But in his facsimile of that document her signature does not appear. In the absence of almost all information about Mrs. Lamb, even her handwriting would have been something. But Lucas failed to contribute it.

John Lamb was, as we have seen, a man of native talent, which he expressed in various ways. His verses made a strong impression on his children, and Charles Lamb never outgrew his early over-estimation of his father's poems. Miss Sarah Lamb is described by her nephew as 'forever' reading 'good books'. Her favourite good books were *The Imitation of Christ* and the Roman Catholic Prayer Book. Charles Lamb said that she never read any secular literature. Her general education may have been slender, but she had, according to Charles, that to compensate which is sometimes much better: a native endowment of common sense and shrewd wit. Charles credits his aunt with a fine gift for repartee. Though he gives no examples, this is easy to believe. He was himself inspired by some strong example to develop himself in this direction. So swift and shrewd was his repartee that his friends sometimes declared that his sayings were richer and wiser than the things that he wrote.

Sarah Lamb, a humble woman in manners and appearance, possessed a decided personality. What her nephew tells about her leads one to speculate about her origin. She and her brother had belonged to a family that abode in a solitary, remote, desolate fen somewhere in Lincolnshire. John Lamb told his children that he had never seen the inside of a church until he was seven years old, the reason being, as he said, that the roads were so bad and the church was so far away. Except for Aunt Sarah, Papa, an aunt living in Southwark, and an unnamed 'wealthy relation', none of this Lincolnshire family enters the Lambs' picture. The children knew nothing about their northern ancestors; at least they told nothing about them. If the family had a secret, it was well kept. But Aunt Sarah's history suggests that there might have been one and what it might have been.

An elderly woman like this Lincolnshire spinster does not capriciously and of her own choosing take to daily and hourly reading of the Roman Catholic Prayer Book, pursuing such devotion to the exclusion of almost every other occupation. Sarah Lamb persisted in reading her prayers, says Charles, all day long and far into the night, 'although admonished daily concerning their Papistical tendency'—admonished, no doubt, by her Anglican sister-in-law. When the children wanted Aunt Sarah to read the books in Mr. Salt's library, she refused and called these works 'nasty books'. True, she went to the Protestant church on Sundays. After a while she discovered the rising Unitarian movement and transferred her Sunday attendance to the Unitarian chapel. But her week-day devotion to her Catholic Prayer Book continued undiminished. Charles's summing-up of his aunt's religion was this: 'With some little asperities in her constitution . . . she was a steadfast, friendly being, and a fine *old Christian*.'

The unavoidable inference is that Sarah Lamb had been brought up in the Roman Catholic faith and that, more loyal than her brother, she continued the practice of her religion in spite of obstacles. Her concealments were doubtless for his sake, since he could never have held his humble sinecure in the Temple Commons had he been a Roman Catholic. His sons would not have been eligible for Christ's Hospital scholarships. Neither would they have been eligible for the positions in the South Sea House and India House which Mr. Salt afterwards procured for them. All this was to be changed during the lifetime of Charles and Mary Lamb; but the generation to which their parents belonged still suffered from the most drastic disabilities. No young man could go to the university or practise law, no old man could bequeath property, if he was a Catholic. Under the circumstances it is quite understandable that the Lambs, supposing they were Catholics, would have tried to conceal it.

Sarah Lamb's steady persistence in her religion at home may well have been at the bottom of the trouble between herself and her sister-in-law. A domestic religious war would go far to explain the contentious home atmosphere. When, as a mature author, Charles Lamb wrote about his aunt, he referred to her religious habits as a mere personal detail. He seemed to be really unaware that her religious leanings, as he described

them, might have had any serious significance. Equally, Mary seemed to be unaware that her mother's and aunt's differences were more than a simple misunderstanding of each other's temperament. It is quite possible that neither Charles nor Mary, as children, ever fully grasped that Papa's side of the family was Catholic, assuming that it was so, and that this blank in their young intelligences was never afterwards filled out. There are childish beliefs and convictions in everyone which no amount of adult knowledge and experience avails afterwards to correct. Charles and Mary Lamb were especially prone by temperament to such charming but often misleading survivals.

Aunt Sarah's 'Papistical tendencies' might also account for Charles's childish illusion that she was a witch. This secret fear took hold of his mind at the age of six, and his resulting condition reached the acuteness of a nervous breakdown. The climax of his state is related in detail in his story, 'The Witch Aunt'. Seeing the old lady reading her prayers late at night, he was suddenly seized by an uncontrollable idea. 'A confusion was in my head, *who* it was I had seen that night:—it was my aunt, and it was not my aunt.—it was that good creature who loved me above all the world, engaged at her good task of devotions—perhaps praying for some good to me. Again, it was a witch,—a creature hateful to God and man, reading backward the good prayers; who would perhaps destroy me. In these conflicts of mind I passed several weeks, till, by a revolution in my fate, I was removed to the house of a female relation of my mother's. . . . It is impossible to say how much good that lady . . . did to me by changing the scene. . . . I soon learned to laugh at witch stories; and when I returned . . . to our own house, my good aunt appeared to me in the same light in which I had viewed her from my infancy, before that foolish fancy possessed me, or rather, I should say, more kind, more fond, more loving than before.'

To a child nourished as Charles Lamb was on Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* and on Stackhouse's *History of the Holy Bible*, a witch could not have seemed much worse than a Papist. If his affectionate and devoted aunt had to be assigned to either category, he would have trembled equally at its wickedness. But either idea was naturally too repellent for his sensitive, loving heart to bear, and all the distressful symptoms which are described in 'The Witch Aunt' were the result.

Mary Lamb too passed through a nervous crisis, similar to her brother's. She relates it in one of her best known and most admired stories: 'The Young Mahometan'. A little girl, Margaret Green, had stumbled on a book called *Mahometanism Explained*. She had anxiously concluded after reading it that she was a Mahometan. But she kept the discovery to herself. The painful part of the matter was that her mother, not being a Mahometan, could not be saved. 'My anxiety on this subject threw me into a fever', Margaret says. She became so distressed that she awoke in the night and begged her mother to 'be so kind as to be a Mahometan'. 'I tried to explain the reason of my request,' she adds, 'but it was in such an incoherent manner that she could not at all comprehend what I was talking about.' A physician was called, and he came accompanied by his very kind wife. They took the little girl home with them for closer observation of her extraordinary malady. By sane and cheerful conversation Margaret Green was induced to reveal her secret and was finally sent home 'perfectly cured'.

Owing to the frankness and intimacy of the material of these stories, 'The Witch Aunt' and 'The Young Mahometan', they have been accepted as personal confessions. It must be more than a coincidence that both Charles and Mary Lamb as children were nervously upset and rendered panicky by a secret about religion. Charles was fearful about his aunt, and Mary about her mother; so that both parties to the family contention were represented in their creations. There must have been an intense secret interest in religion in these children to force them into fantastic formations so definite and long-enduring.

## 7

The children of the Temple were as familiar with the Drury Lane Theatre as with the sound of Bow Bells. A Mr. Field, who was Papa's friend and possibly Mamma's relation, conducted an oil business in Holborn and had a contract to supply the theatre with lights. He received a generous supply of free tickets and shared them open-handedly with the drama-loving Lambs. The children began going to plays when they were six years old. Mary and Charles both remembered the first plays they ever attended and the blissful excitement they experienced. Six-year-old Charles was present at a performance

of *Artaxerxes*. 'It was all enchantment and a dream. No such pleasure has since visited me but in dreams.' He sat through the pantomime intensely solemn, too young to laugh. The oil-man's free tickets introduced him to Congreve's *Way of the World* and other eighteenth-century dramatizations of the Bath school of morality. Christ's Hospital, however, rescued him from this stimulating diversion by refusing to allow him inside a theatre for a term of eight years.

Mary Lamb's first play, at the age of six, was Congreve's *Mourning Bride*. She was embarrassed when, on talking the play over with Papa the next day, she made a slight mistake about the plot. With no Christ's Hospital to interfere, Mary's theatre-going continued on uninterruptedly from then. She went through all of Congreve and the other contemporary idols. At an age when other girls would have been playing with dolls, she was sitting entranced before the sophisticated characters of *The School for Scandal*. Charles Lamb commented in later life on how little of all this stage-world had been understood by himself and his sister. He thought the experience had nevertheless been splendid for both of them. He little considered that either the strenuous trying to understand or the passive acceptance of the mystery had been equally bad for their childish feelings and sympathies.

## 8

Fortunately for English literature, the precocious Lambs had an antidote to the theatre in their life in the country. There they knew cows and daisies, sheep and pastures, orchards and wheat-fields. Charles and Mary could never have written their delicate poetry without the hours they had spent in the green gardens of Blakesware. Without this acquaintance with natural beauty, they could never have been the bold pioneers in the true criticism of Shakespeare which they afterwards became.

The children of Elizabeth Lamb were often invited, by permission of the Blakesware country gentry, to stay with her mother, Mrs. Elizabeth Field. The housekeeper's grandchildren were pleasantly familiar with the Plumer manor-house, its parks and its gardens. John, the eldest, was allowed to ride the Plumers' spirited horses. It was probably here at Blakesware also that John acquired the taste for fine paintings

which made him something of a connoisseur in his later years. Mary, who was a big girl before Charles came into the world, spent long months as a child alone with her grandmother. But according to her recollections, embodied in her stories, her grandmother paid her very little attention.

The lady of the manor, the last of the Plumers to reside at Blakesware, showed the child an occasional kindness. In particular she praised Mary's reading, announcing positively within Mary's hearing: 'I never heard a child read so distinctly' While the aged Mrs. Plumer was talking of her needlework and the elderly housekeeper was prosing about the marriages, births, and deaths in the Plumer family, the little girl wandered alone about the premises. 'I used to long to have a fairy's power,' she relates, 'to call the children down from their [portraits] to play with me. One little girl in particular . . . I often invited to walk . . . with me, but she still kept her station—one arm around a little lamb's neck and in her hand a bunch of roses!' Mary, standing before the portrait, would so gladly have exchanged places with the little girl's pet. Another work of art that held her spellbound was a tapestry representing the story of Hagar and Ishmael. She rehearsed to herself daily the details of the biblical history. At other times she stationed herself before the heads of the twelve Caesars that hung about the hall. She climbed upon a chair to study their faces until she knew every feature by heart. On one and the same day she played at being a petted, beautiful Plumer heiress, a tragic and outcast Ishmael, and a magnificent Caesar. All these ravishing adventures could be repeated in fancy the next day, and the next, and the next.

Old Mrs. Plumer, blind and a recluse for years, died at last when Mary was thirteen. For the next fourteen years the housekeeper, Mrs. Field, remained in sole charge of the mansion. The place stood untouched with all its furnishings, careless evidence of the wealth of a great Whig landowner. During this time Mrs. Field's youngest grandson, Charles Lamb, became acquainted with its tapestries, paintings, and gardens as intimately as his brother and sister before him. He was more inclined than they to regard these things as his own, in spite of his grandmother's frequent reminders to the contrary. There were children's toys left lying about in the deserted house which he looked at but did not touch. In truth Charles

was not tempted to play with toys when he had fine tapestries and Hogarth drawings to enjoy. Only once did the little food-loving Charles fall so low as to be tempted by a peach on the garden wall. It is the sole instance of anything approaching a depredation on the part of the housekeeper's grandchildren.

In their reminiscences Mrs. Elizabeth Field is sometimes described as a pretty harsh old lady. Charles's chief complaint was that she blew powdered sugar into his eye, pretending to remove a fly. His other complaint, that she scrubbed him on Saturday nights with Witney flannel and strong soap, is related with a humorous exaggeration that leaves the cruelty of the performance somewhat in doubt. Mary remembered bitterly how her grandmother would sometimes say to her. 'Polly, what are those poor crazy moythered brains of yours thinking always?' To Mary, who was always thinking of herself as Caesar, Ishmael, and a beautiful heiress, this was naturally an insulting question.

But Mrs. Field must have liked her daughter's children well enough, since she had them with her for long months of the year. They continued to visit Blakesware as long as she lived. Charles's last stay there, a memorable one for him, took place when he was seventeen. This was just before his grandmother died and during her last long illness. Perhaps the worst that may be said of her is expressed in the words of Mary Lamb, who said, as she herself approached the end of life. 'Old people are so stupid.'

All things considered, Blakesware was probably the more wholesome and inspiring of the two childhood homes of the Lamb children.



## CHAPTER II

### *The Storm*

THE birth of Charles Lamb coincided with the beginning of a period of war excitement in England. An atmosphere of stress and strain mounting to hysteria continued long to rack the mind of the general public. It was one of those seemingly endless ordeals through which whole nations have to pass at apparently preordained intervals. Just two months after Charles Lamb drew his first breath, the Battle of Lexington boomed forth the beginning of a prolonged revolutionary era, the repercussions of which he was to feel practically all his life. England was not again to know for a generation the sensations of peace and security.

For many years public opinion wavered between the two warring factions. The great Whig leaders, Chatham, Burke, and Fox, led a well-organized sentiment on behalf of the Americans. The unfortunate German who sat on the throne and espoused the cause of the English crown had these subjects to combat as well as the organized malcontents beyond the seas. The Whigs won in the end and George III succumbed to a psychosis. His disease may be regarded as a result and a measure of the degree of the existing excitement. A brief term of harassed readjustment followed and then the French Revolution again shattered all peace. What had happened during the American wars was but a prelude to the chapter of emotion that followed. The half-broken Whigs broke utterly under the storm, and a final split in the anti-Georgian party shattered English stability like an earthquake. It was not long before the grand climax, Napoleon, lifted his head above the horizon and brought the greatest of all periods of terror upon the English. Not again till the monster was chained at St. Helena, and then but slowly, did the agonizing public tremors subside.

All this from the beginning to the end took up about fifty years. Not only Charles Lamb but also his sister Mary and his

brother John were fated to spend the greater part of their lives in this difficult half-century. These London-born children belonged to what we have learned in our time to call significantly the war generation. Mary and John were approaching adolescence when the American Revolution began. Their childish eyes must have seen perhaps, with suitable curiosity, the portentous figures of Benjamin Franklin and Tom Paine coming and going in the Temple. Charles was entering adolescence when the French storm broke. His weak form must have trembled with the fearful reverberations around him. All three reflected in their lives the difficulties of their era.

## 2

When Charles Lamb was sent to Christ's Hospital, Mary Lamb was seventeen. The moment marked a lull in the national excitement. The American war had been finally and definitely lost and the political turmoil had momentarily quieted. Charles's departure for boarding-school followed upon the heels of the treaty of peace. Mary spent her next few years in pining for her playfellow. With three women in the house—herself, her mother, and her aunt—she had little to do. She was old enough to have her future settled, but no doors opened outward for her. If she had been intended for domestic service, it would have been the proper time to start this career. But genteel occupations had been planned for her brothers, and Mary also apparently expected something better than domestic service. She was vaguely headed for the ultimate distinction of becoming 'Miss Lamb'.

But this could not last for ever. A timid and bookish young woman, without social classification of any kind, she probably had small chance of marriage. Even the most impractical family—and the fantastic Lambs were not altogether impractical—could see that Mary would have to earn her living. Within another three or four years, at the age of twenty or thereabouts, she began working at the trade of seamstress.

Mary would certainly have liked to be a teacher had there been any way into the profession open to her. There was a dame school in the Temple or near by kept by a Mrs. Elizabeth Reynolds, which little Charles Lamb attended for a short time. Mary knew Mrs. Reynolds, an odd little woman with an

impediment of speech, which could have done the stammering Charles no good at all, except that it formed the basis of a permanent mutual sympathy. The only alliance between Mary and Mrs. Reynolds was one of friendship. Instead of following in Mrs. Reynolds's footsteps, Mary turned to sewing. Her childish picture of the kind, elegant, needlework-loving Mrs. Plumer presumably weighted her choice.

Mary became a dressmaker, or a mantua-maker, as the trade was called in those days. She could not have succeeded at this work without considerable ability. Paris set the fashions then as it has done since. The elaborateness of French styles was such that it became one of the causes of the French Revolution. The concoction of a fashionable dress, or even of a head-dress of expensive materials, required a high degree of skill and efficiency. This skill and efficiency Mary achieved sufficiently to earn her living. She had served some kind of apprenticeship, whether long or short, successfully, and had found the means of marketing her labour. It shows a surprising early level of adjustment in a life that was later on to deviate so far from normality. The ominous side of the picture even then was that Mary did her work at home. Her dressmaking went on in the same narrow chambers in which the whole family lived. Home work in London was common, of course; but in that ingrowing, shut-in, excitable household it added another element of stress and strain to the existing tension.

A glimpse of the Lambs at this time, however, shows them enjoying a reasonably peaceful and progressive life. The oldest boy, John, had left Christ's Hospital at fifteen and had been for several years at the South Sea House. According to Charles Lamb's description of this institution, it offered a sad career from the point of view of the mettlesome youth that John Lamb is said to have been. The South Sea 'Bubble' had burst for many thousands of people, but it still had meagre dividends for certain preferential investors. For one thing, it gave poorly paid employment to stockholders' protégés whom they did not otherwise know where to place. Samuel Salt was one of these preferred investors. Young John Lamb, with the beard just sprouting on his face, was sent to work with dull, somnolent old bachelors. But the employment was genteel and the pay was sure.

Charles Lamb had meantime progressed to the middle of his

course at Christ's Hospital, with the presumption that he would eventually follow further in his brother's footsteps. His future was similarly assured. Mrs Lamb's health was good. John Lamb the elder was still a robed pannier, only slightly bent with age, the active chief of the other Temple waiters. His amiable patron, Mr. Salt, was growing older, yet he kept his practical affairs in order and his financial fields as well tended as ever. Business went on as usual in London, strangely undamaged by the American war, and the well-heeled Mr. Salt may be assumed to have enjoyed his share of the general prosperity. Yet there were occasional faint presagings of a new dawn in the world, while ominous forewarnings of change crept even into the Benchers' corner.

## 3

In the year 1786 Salt suffered a severe illness. He was nursed by Mrs. Lamb, with great 'care and attention' as the Benchers noted and as one likes to remember, for the records of Mrs Lamb's kind acts are more than sparse. Under her nursing Mr. Salt recovered his health completely. But the seriousness of his illness reminded him that his years were numbered. The Benchers made his will. He left £500 in South Sea stock to his 'servant, John Lamb', and £200 separately to his servant's wife. His generosity was not immoderate in view of the facts that John Lamb had served him well for forty years and that Salt was a bachelor without near relations. But that was his testament and the legatees were all too soon to reap its benefits, such as they were.

Public events were thickening unpleasantly around the ageing barrister's head. The Whigs had been reduced to a party of minor political influence. After many inside years Salt and his friends were left on the outside struggling to get in. According to Charles Lamb's portrait of Salt in the 'Old Benchers', he was gently stubborn about his politics. 'Many a sarcastic growl did [Coventry, the Tory] cast out . . . at the political confederates of his associate [Salt], which rebounded from the gentle bosom of the latter like cannon-balls from wool.' But Salt was getting a bit old now for the outside struggle. In May 1789 came the assembling of the French States-General. We are told that this was not at once realized as a shock in

England. But the fall of the Bastille followed in July; the King and the royal family were forced to return to Paris from Versailles in October; and the Declaration of the Rights of Man was proclaimed in November. By this time the news had got around and the reaction was terrific. Anxiety had quickened to terror; and terror to panic. To an ageing man, strongly set in his opinions and unchanging by temperament, the ensuing turmoil in England must have been an ordeal.

At the beginning of the summer of 1792 Salt fell ill again; and in July, with London still aghast at the incredible mobbing of the Tuileries, the Benchler died. For the Lambs his death piled a personal crisis on top of the social crisis.

For several months past, the aged Mrs Field at Blakesware had been sinking to the grave with cancer. One month after Salt's demise the old lady died too. Her body was borne with great respect to the Widford village churchyard, and the manor-house, which had sheltered the Lamb children, was closed for ever. Thus simultaneously they lost their two guardian angels in the secured classes. Income, home, and the balance of old and fixed associations crashed all at once. The warp and woof of their whole existence were suddenly rent asunder.

## 4

The Lamb family left the Temple for a life of banishment and exile. John Lamb had lived in the enclosure the greater part of his life and his children had there grown to maturity. It had been their home for two generations. But the Corporation of the Temple was not a personal overlord like the benign Blakesware owners who had allowed their aged housekeeper a home in which to spend her declining years. The elderly waiter had to strike out now into new paths. A fateful migration led him and his family to No. 7, Little Queen Street in near-by Holborn. There they settled down in respectable but cramped lodgings. The house into which they moved has been long since wiped out by London street-widening operations. The scene of the most painful chapter in their lives does not now survive.

The effects of the change on the unfortunate family were soon manifested. The sixty-seven-year-old John Lamb deteriorated rapidly into senility. A witless but harmless derelict, he sat

all day in idleness or begging someone to play cribbage with him. Charles Lamb's picture of his father as the strength and stay of the weaker Salt hardly prepares one for his relatively early decay. The result of Salt's death would rather show that the opposite was the case. Also, Elizabeth Lamb, ten years younger than her husband, began to break up, not mentally but physically, in the Holborn lodgings. Some illness, probably arthritis, reduced her to a chair-bound cripple. Sarah Lamb was the only one of the three elderly people who preserved her usual strength and faculties, although she was by several years the most ancient. The Atlas beneath the load was Mary. Charles remained still too young to count very much and John Lamb the younger had moved away from the family when they left the Temple.

Mary Lamb plied her trade as seamstress to the accompaniment of her parents' ills and her aunt's prayers. She wielded her needle and shears in desperate earnest. The moral responsibility formed only a part of the task that had fallen upon her. The economic need had to be met also.

Salt's bequests had been decent rather than magnanimous. John Lamb's South Sea stock might possibly have produced an income of £20 a year. He had an additional £10 a year for doing an annual chore for the executors. Mrs. Lamb's gift of £200 represented a diminishing margin of safety. Aunt Sarah's small annuity continued to help out, as it had done previously in the Temple. In all this there was certainly not enough to keep so many going. If the record is correct, the rest of the expenses had to be supplied by Mary. She forced herself to go out and solicit trade, and succeeded to the extent of requiring an apprentice to help her. At thirty Mary Lamb filled the role of an established dressmaker in Little Queen Street, supplying a London trade.

The bulk of the catastrophe fell most unfairly, as it must have seemed to her, on her shoulders. Her brothers were slightly favoured. Through a sex discrimination she had already learned to resent, they escaped some of the misfortunes that fell to her share. Along with her parents she had dropped to a lower social level. Her brothers, having already partially climbed to a higher outlook, were able to maintain it through school associations. But Mary, as genuinely refined and cultivated as they, lapsed into sheer dull isolation, poverty, and

drudgery. She became the social Ishmael she had once played at being.

The ambition of her brothers left her to shoulder the family finances alone. Charles had been apprenticed at the East India House, where, according to his contract, he was to work for three years without receiving wages. In spite of the disaster in the Lambs' fortunes, this contract was to be carried out and Charles was to be supported by his family—that is, by Mary—for the three ensuing years. Meanwhile John had embraced the state of single blessedness which a South Sea House accountant was supposed to embrace. 'They were mostly', says Charles Lamb (I transpose a bit), 'bachelors, for the establishment did not admit of superfluous salaries.' Good-looking and twenty-nine, John had clung to the family as long as they remained in the Temple. That he chose the moment of their exodus to withdraw to his own quarters is understandable. It is also understandable that he could make no contribution to their support afterwards. The East India House and the South Sea House exacted the last ounce of flesh from the families of those whom they ultimately rewarded with gentlemanly employment and salaries at a trifle better than starvation rates.

Overworked, ill-adapted, unassisted, Mary Lamb plodded through the first years of her disorganized life in Little Queen Street. Her history was not known, seen, or reported for three years. An atmosphere of rigid silence and brooding trouble rests on her pilgrimage through this wilderness. One exceptional glimpse is afforded by the records of Robert Southey, who, bent on an errand he should never have undertaken, paid the Lambs a cursory visit. His impression is fraught with ominous suggestion. 'When I saw the family (one time only) . . . they were lodging somewhere near Lincoln's Inn, on the western side (I forget the street) and were evidently in uncomfortable circumstances. The father and mother were both living; and I have some dim recollection of the latter's invalid appearance. The father's senses had failed him before that time.'

It is noteworthy that these same years were also the darkest years of the French Revolution. They saw the imprisonment of the King and his family in the Temple, the beheading of the King and Queen, and the period of the first Terror. Mary Lamb was living through personal and public history at its angriest



JOHN LAMB

Father of Mary and Charles Lamb





ROBERT SOUTHEY  
*Painting by Peter Vandycke [N.P.G.]*

and at its cruellest. A vengeful destiny seemed to be raining thunderbolts alike on herself and the world.

It is not to be supposed that Mary Lamb missed the most exciting book of the year 1792, the year that initiated her hardest struggle. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Mary Wollstonecraft had set forth the blasting thesis that women should be equally educated with men 'If woman be not prepared by education to be the companion of man,' she wrote, 'she will stop the progress of knowledge, for truth must be common to all, or it will be inefficacious with respect to its influence or general practice.' In spite of its heresy her book was restrained by comparison with the hysteria of the opposition it evoked. In the midst of the hue and cry Mary Wollstonecraft departed for Paris. It was the last straw in the behaviour of the bold woman. To Mary Lamb the teachings of Mary Wollstonecraft were a familiar current thought, the thesis of the *Vindication* was one to which she had already in her own way given some attention. Neither the excitement caused by the author nor the teaching of the book itself helped to relieve her private revolt against the unfairness of her situation.

## 5

The adolescent years of Charles Lamb were halting and long-drawn-out. Leaving school at fifteen, he was not placed at once in regular work, like his brother John. By this slight deviation the literary gift of his later years was probably saved from early suffocation. Salt did not know 'what on earth to do with Charles'. The undersized, rickety, stammering youth presented a none too hopeful aspect to the practical employer. He was physically too much like the material from which chimney-sweeps were so plentifully manufactured. At last a friend of a friend of Salt's came nobly to the rescue. 'Let him have the run of my counting-house for the present', said Mr. Plaice. In this ambiguous position young Charles spent two easy years. A place was then found for him under his brother John in the South Sea House.

Here he worked for six months, earning ten shillings a week. Why the South Sea House did not continue to employ him is not explained. But it was probably because a better prospect was afforded by the East India House, a much more prosperous

corporation, where Salt was also a director. Charles became formally apprenticed and entered on his unrewarded duties. Having accomplished all this successfully, Salt promptly died, leaving to Mary Lamb the task of putting her brother through his training period.

All boys in their teens need parents, and Charles Lamb had practically lost his. His brother John and his sister Mary now stood in that thankless relation to him. Against them he revolted. With two of his old Christ's Hospital cronies, he became a frequenter of ale-houses. The three youths, who had been bred in the Elizabethan tradition by James Boyer, fancied themselves as replicas of the dissolute Peele, Greene, and Marlowe. They met at the Feathers, an ale-house in Holborn, where they drank, smoked, and exchanged literary dreams into the small hours. All this went on while Charles Lamb, still an India House apprentice, was not earning a single penny. One might ask who paid for his share of the entertainment. One of the trio, James White, had a salaried position and was a generous soul into the bargain. So perhaps White knew the answer.

James White, the 'Jem White' of Elia's memories, put forth the most promising literary claims at the moment. He had written a series of letters purporting to be those of 'Sir John Falstaff and His Friends'. They were to be published in 1796 and were fated to survive as James White's first and last literary work. Charles Lamb is reliably reported to have helped with the letters, although his name did not appear in connexion with them. Thus perhaps Lamb paid a debt of honour to his open-handed friend. White had so identified himself with the character of Falstaff that he was called 'Sir John' by his companions, none of whom would have thought of asking him to share this unique appellation. The *Falstaffian Letters* are a further clue to the convivial habits of young Charles Lamb. It is important as showing that he was well inducted into the ways of ale-houses before he met Coleridge.

## 6

Samuel Taylor Coleridge interrupted the three *mousquetaires* early in the winter of 1794. He had taken French leave of his studies at Cambridge and had arrived 'in Town', as Lamb put

it, at the beginning of December. At the moment Coleridge was committed to more things than any other young man in England—to more things, in fact, than any young man of twenty-one should ever be committed to. He was committed to finishing his studies at Cambridge and after that to taking holy orders. He was committed to the reconstruction of society through a scheme called Pantisocracy. Furthermore, he had just committed himself to an engagement with a young lady in Bristol, Miss Sarah Fricker. Additionally, he had given his heart to another young lady, Miss Mary Evans, who had wandered, distractingly, into his orbit. The fulcrum of so many heavy commitments, Coleridge could think of nothing else to do but to step out from under and run away into hiding. Arrived in London, he lodged at the Angel Inn and wrote to nobody, believing himself at last free and happy. His prompt meeting with Lamb came about through the Bluecoat fraternity and the Boyer circle. The twain met, and the jovial Feathers group crumbled; for Lamb henceforth had time only for his friend, the ex-Grecian, Coleridge.

The young men chose for their meeting-place the Salutation and Cat, a tavern exactly opposite the doorway of Christ's Hospital. There they settled in for the winter's idyll. The late E. V. Lucas, biographer of Charles Lamb, could never bring himself to refer to this tavern by its full name. He called it the Salutation. The evenings with Coleridge were a more heady experience for young Charles Lamb than anything he had yet encountered. Everything about them was special. The tobacco that was smoked, Oronooko, was special, their drink, 'egg-hot', was special; and their talk, Coleridge's talk, was very special. The old simple-hearted Falstaffian horseplay and humour were past. This was all deadly earnest. The conversation ranged through metaphysics, transcendentalism, and Pantisocracy. An atmosphere of intense idealism hung, heavy as their tobacco smoke, over the nightly conclaves. Coleridge was the teacher, Lamb the disciple. 'Better it is to give than to receive', wrote Lamb to Coleridge two years later; 'and I was a very patient hearer, and docile scholar, in our winter evening meetings at Mr. May's; was I not? What I have owed to thee, my heart can ne'er forget.'

Coleridge, two years older than Lamb, had been at Christ's Hospital a figure marked by superlative scholarship. At Cam-

bridge University he had added to the ancient trappings of Greek and Latin the modern ideologies of German transcendentalism and French Revolution. As compared with the fledgeling Lamb, he wielded all the prestige. His magnetic personality had been demonstrated at Cambridge, where he had gained a considerable following—enough to disturb the authorities. All his learning, magnetism, and eloquence were now lavished on one disciple. It was Charles Lamb's flaming adventure; but for Coleridge, too, revelling in his regained paradise of freedom, the friendship with Lamb was a fair haven.

The young men wrote sonnets that winter. It was the season of poetry and love. Both of them—yes, Charles also—were suffering from hopeless love. Coleridge's grand passion for Mary Evans was matched by Lamb's thwarted love for Ann Simmons. Lamb's heartbreak had not been healed from two years before, for he had not seen Ann Simmons since the spring before his grandmother's death. His biographers have been at some pains to explain why Ann Simmons at that time rejected Charles Lamb. But there is really no reason to suppose that the seventeen-year-old boy, still not even apprenticed at India House, had been so rash as to propose marriage. Lamb had certainly known the Widford maiden, however, and her pale image had lingered on in his dreams. Touched by the sympathetic magic of Coleridge's grand passion, she had suddenly gleamed forth as the matchless 'Anna' of his sonnets. As Mrs. Ann Bartram of Leicester Square in London, she never gave the slightest indication that she had known Charles Lamb, nor sounded a note of appreciation of the author who had made her famous. In the meantime the two young martyrs to hopeless passion found solace in their tavern affinity and a blessed escape in poetry.

In extenuation of the sentimentalists, if they need any extenuation beyond their youth, one might mention the nature of the times. All England was upset that winter. Out of sheer fright at France's crisis, English civil liberties had been stamped out. The portion of the youth of the country that was given to idealism had been forced into hiding and secret rebellion. Wordsworth made a dash for France and in the most un-Anglican manner became the father of an illegitimate child. Mary Wollstonecraft fled to the French Revolutionaries and defied convention by becoming an unmarried mother. The

Honourable Charles James Fox was living in open adultery with Mrs. Armistead. The Prince of Wales, the future George IV, was preparing to commit simple bigamy by marrying Caroline of Brunswick. The rule of plain, old-style, repressive morality in England was declining. Charles Lamb and Coleridge, hiding in their smoky corner of the Salutation and Cat, were like many young men of the times. If they had eased their tremors only in their sentimental lovelorn sonnets, all might still have been well with them. But in these intense winter evenings was laid the firm groundwork of a greater evil: the habit of physical tipsiness. It was their tragic complement to the general moral confusion.

## 7

In all this Mary Lamb had her small share. Charles Lamb was not exclusive with his friends. James White and Coleridge were both frequent visitors of his family. Coleridge's clever, charming discourse fell on the ears of the ancient aunt, the senile father, and the crippled mother, but more than all on the solitary starved soul of Mary Lamb. John Lamb the younger was often present and delighted in this wonderful talk, though with a certain elder brother's distrust of the accompanying pipe-smoking and ale-drinking. Mary, too, though committed to Charles in all things, must have seen the faults of the intimacy.

During the winter Mary fell ill. Her condition drew from Coleridge, if not the tribute of flowers, some graceful verses from his pen. They were addressed to Charles and ran as follows:

*In fancy (well I know)  
From business wandering far and local cares,  
Thou creep'st round a dear-loved sister's bed  
With noiseless step, and watchest the faint look,  
Soothing each pang with fond solicitude,  
And tenderest tones medicinal of love. . . .*

*Cheerily, dear Charles!  
Thou thy best friend shalt cherish many a year;  
Such warm presages feel I of high Hope.  
For not uninterested the dear Maid  
I've viewed—her soul affectionate yet wise,  
Her polish'd wit as mild as lambent glories  
That play around a sainted infant's head.*

Unlike Ann Simmons of Widford, who had all the country swains at her feet, Mary Lamb had seen very few men in her life and certainly not another man like Coleridge. She was older than he by eight years; but he was in some ways more mature than his age. His glowing, Rubens-like face, his surpassing eloquence, and, above all, his early literary success made him a godlike figure. The slightest attention from him, though only reflected through her brother, was something to treasure. As for Coleridge, engaged to one damsel and in love with another, he could certainly look with tender appreciation on a third.

It was a shock to all three when fate at last caught up with Coleridge. Destiny, in the form of the young poet Robert Southey, one day suddenly knocked at Coleridge's door. Southey had come down from Bristol as the brother-in-law and knight of the long-neglected Miss Fricker. Years afterwards, and still just as serious as then, Southey exposed his motive for that visit in the following lines to his publisher: 'Coleridge did not come back to Bristol till January 1795; nor would he, I believe, have come back at all if I had not gone to London to look for him. For having got there from Cambridge at the beginning of winter there he remained without writing to Miss Fricker or to me, till we actually apprehended that his friends had placed him somewhere in confinement.'

To add to the weight of Southey's pressure, Mary Evans, the beautiful rival of Miss Fricker, had engaged herself to another suitor. Furthermore, the Lambs, Coleridge's only London allies, were not the sort of people to make much impression on Southey, the son of a respectable linen-draper. The glorious poet and hero of the Salutation and Cat wilted and tamely allowed himself to be removed from London. He returned to Miss Fricker. As Stephen Potter puts it, 'Coleridge had managed to act for perhaps the first and certainly for the last time in his life as he "ought" to have acted.' If Southey had only paid Coleridge's tavern bill before they so hastily departed, it might have improved somewhat the impression of his act. But Mr. May's score he left to be paid by Lamb with the first earnings he received from India House.

Summer and autumn passed over the household in Little Queen Street. The strain of economic conditions did not relax; nor did the pall of dullness and complaining old age lift within

doors There were frequent harsh, hot-tempered words in the family. Charles occasionally escaped to meet an old Christ's Hospital friend, sometimes bring him to his home. But he had no crony like Coleridge, and cronies were to Charles, then, as at every stage of his life, the breath of his nostrils.

## 8

In October 1795 the news came that Coleridge had at last married Sarah Fricker. Almost a year had passed since he had hurriedly left London. In the meantime the scheme of Pantisocracy and settlement on the Susquehanna, in the interest of which the engagement had been contracted, had been relinquished. But the engagement of marriage held. Southey had secretly married Sarah Fricker's sister and had then departed for Portugal, whither his family were sending him in the hope of separating him from both Pantisocracy and his love.

Three of the Misses Fricker married Pantisocracy poets; Mary married Robert Lovell, Sarah married Coleridge, and Edith married Robert Southey. A fourth sister, Martha, was asked in marriage by George Burnet, still another member of the Pantisocracy group. But 'Aunt Martha', says her niece, 'refused him scornfully, seeing that he only wanted a wife in a hurry, not her individually of all the world.' Martha Fricker lived and died a highly respectable spinster and seamstress in London.

Charles and Mary Lamb, from the depths of their Little Queen Street exile, sent cordial good wishes to the married Coleridge. Still too ignorant of their hero, they considered him a Benedict and lost to them. Charles, feeling himself forsaken, lapsed into the deepest despondency. By comparison with Coleridge's matrimonial decisiveness, his dream of wedding Ann Simmons began to show flimsy. Perhaps something definite happened in her direction—such as her marriage to Bartram. Perhaps nothing happened except that her bright image suddenly and alarmingly faded. When the next Christmas season came around, Charles Lamb had suffered a nervous breakdown and was confined in a hospital for mental diseases at Hoxton.

Charles's illness was of short duration. The casualness with which it was taken by his family and by India House, where he



was received back without question after his absence, is, to say the least, surprising. Charles, too, once recovered, took a light-hearted view of his ordeal. 'The six weeks that finished last year and began this,' he wrote to Coleridge, 'your very humble servant spent very agreeably in a mad house at Hoxton; I am got somewhat rational now, and don't bite anyone.' It requires something more than Lamb's habitual irreverence to explain this. Though it marks the beginning of his method as a humorist, whereby he so often amused his readers by utterly surprising them, it seems to indicate more. His short sojourn at Hoxton had apparently not been unmixed misery.

Strangely naïve was his idea that his friend would be flattered by this confession: 'Coleridge, it may convince you of my regards for you when I tell you my head ran on you in my madness, as much almost as on another Person, who I am inclined to think was the more immediate cause of my temporary frenzy.' The more important Person is supposed to have been Ann Simmons, whose image by now was so pale in Lamb's imagination that he confused it in his current verses with one of the painted portraits at Blakesware. But he was resolved that if he could not marry his ideal, he would fall like Lucifer for a grand misery. He would be satisfied with nothing less than the tragic consequences of love.

Another prepossession of his short derangement concerned the character of Young Norval, the hero of the sensational and popular *Tragedy of Douglas*. When Charles suddenly lost his sense of reality he became the young shepherd of the play, who died at the hands of his unwitting father and whose mother then killed herself with grief. This eighteenth-century invention he must have seen performed at Drury Lane many times in his childhood. The part of the distraught mother usually fell to Mrs. Siddons, whose fancied resemblance to his own mother Charles liked to dwell upon. One can trace the source of the man's delusion in the child's intense reactions to the Drury Lane melodrama. Still, his delirious career as Young Norval could not have been an altogether agreeable experience. Charles was certainly punishing himself severely during his illness for some unconscious cause.

Charles paid no attention to Mary in his wandering moments, but during his lucid intervals his thoughts turned to her. In one of these he wrote the remorseful tribute, 'To My Sister':

*If from my lips some angry accents fell,  
 Peevish complaint, or harsh reproof unkind,  
 'Twas but the error of a sickly mind  
 And troubled thoughts, clouding the purer well,  
 And waters clear, of Reason; and for me  
 Let this my verse the poor atonement be,  
 My verse, which thou to praise wert e'er inclined  
 Too highly, and with a partial eye to see  
 No blemish Thou to me didst ever show  
 Kindest affection; and would oft-times lend  
 An ear to the desponding love-sick lay,  
 Weeping my sorrows with me, who repay  
 But ill the mighty debt of love I owe,  
 Mary, to thee, my sister and my friend*

John Lamb the younger did not take so light a view of his brother's illness as did others. John agreed with Charles, though with quite a different meaning, that Coleridge had been the cause of his brother's behaviour 'Much as he dwelt upon your conversation while you were among us', Lamb wrote scathingly of his brother, 'and delighted to be with you, it has been his fashion ever since to depreciate and cry you down,—you were the cause of my madness,—you and your damned foolish sensibility and melancholy,—and he lamented with a true brotherly feeling that we ever met, even as the sober citizen, when his son went astray upon the mountains of Parnassus, is said to have "cursed wit and poetry and Pope".' But Charles had grown too much accustomed to John's lack of sympathy for his rebuke in the matter to have any value. Even this did not prevent him from priding himself on his grand debacle 'I look back on it, at times,' he confided, 'with a gloomy kind of envy; for while it lasted I had many, many hours of pure happiness. Dream not, Coleridge, of having tasted all the grandeur and wildness of fancy, till you have gone mad'

## 9

The world had reached midsummer 1796. A new-born figure, that of Napoleon Bonaparte, had arisen in France, one which threatened to become more frightening than the terrible Robespierre. All Europe trembled at its appearance. As if in league with the monster, a violent midsummer gale swept over London and left havoc in its wake. Fate decreed that a stone

blown from a wall and hurled against him as he passed by should seriously injure John Lamb junior. He suffered much and lay in bed for weeks. Though he lived in his own chambers, his family in Little Queen Street naturally shared the misfortune of his accident. It proved a serious business. 'Poor fellow, he is very feverish and light-headed,' wrote Charles, 'but Cruikshank has pronounced the symptoms favourable and gives us every hope that there will be no need of amputation.' John apparently did not lose his leg. The robust well-built man whose figure Charles so much admired and praised in his writings could scarcely have been a cripple. But in Charles's 'Dream Children', written many years afterwards, his imagination required that the leg should go. In the fictitious 'Dream Children' the doctor took off John's leg.

In reality Charles and Mary nursed him tenderly while he lay recovering. Charles hastened to him daily from India House, and Mary spent at his bedside all the hours she could spare from her sewing. They gave him the most precious gift that working-class people can give—their time, energy, and devotion.

All the while Mary Lamb, bent under her load, with her frail strength, upheld her distraught world. When it had seemed that her burden could not possibly be greater, her brothers, one after the other, had succeeded in performing the impossible, the one by going to the madhouse, the other by nearly losing his leg. Mary's strength had been tried to the uttermost by these afflictions. The invalids at least had been nursed and cared for, but Mary's passive pain had received no comfort. She who shared every thought with Charles must have seen his absurd outpourings about his madness, and her misplaced sympathy must have been imposed upon. Mary's character was of the same excitable texture as Charles's and her ability to withstand suggestion was no greater than his.

In the late summer a special message came from Coleridge in Bristol. In a cordial letter he invited both Charles and Mary to visit him. But that ray of hope, as far as Mary was concerned, faded instantly. It was plain to absolutely everyone that she could not go. She could not leave her invalid mother. 'My mother has grown so entirely helpless,' Charles replied for her, 'not having any use of her limbs, that Mary is necessarily confined from ever sleeping out, she being her bedfellow. She thanks you though and will accompany me in spirit.' But

this vicarious pleasure was denied her through one 'execrable aristocrat and knave Richardson' of India House, who refused to give Charles a leave of absence. Mary's prison made her brother's India House freedom by comparison, and she could not swear aloud as Charles could at fate. No doubt the touch of kindness and regard shown by Coleridge's invitation was harder to bear than the accustomed hardships and trials of her lot. After its passing glimmer the dark hopelessness within her settled into something more brooding and intense.

## 10

Charles consoled himself with literature, the prime comfort of all his pains, and wrote a lengthy poem on his disappointment. He resumed his old friendship with James White and took a zealous part in seeing White's *Falstaff Letters* through the press. Real things were happening to Mary's friends, but not to Mary. The Coleridges were expecting a baby. Sarah Fricker and her poet would soon have their union blessed by an offspring. But for Mary the days lengthened out without future or hope. She had not even the consolation of being the mistress of her actions, for Elizabeth Lamb, tied to her cripple's chair, still wielded her maternal authority. As her invalidism settled into permanence, it served more and more as a shackle for her devoted daughter. Small wonder that Mary's imaginative temperament, fermenting underneath and seeking for any outlet, should have hit upon a desperate expedient. The sly wish-demon within her hinted that, according to Charles, even madness had *some* moments of happiness.

The Coleridges' baby came into the world on September the 19th. On just what date the news reached London cannot positively be said, but very likely a day or two later. September the 21st was the day of the autumnal equinox, often accompanied by violent storms of the kind which had done so much hurt to Mary's brother John. It was furthermore the day celebrated in bloodstained France as the fourth anniversary of the French Republic. Mary Lamb was no ignoramus; she knew geography and she knew French history. These ominous anniversaries must have darkened the thought she dwelt upon that day under the pressure of her work. How could she shake off her ever increasing burden? Charles would begin to receive

apprentice wages within a few months. But it is always darkest before dawn, and Mary's state had reached this shadow.

On the evening of September the 21st Mary developed a peculiar and alarming trend of behaviour. The family recognized it as similar to the behaviour that had preceded Charles's breakdown. Yet, perhaps remembering Charles's short illness and complete recovery, they proceeded with great deliberation. The next morning, as she still showed the same symptoms, Charles set forth to summon Dr. David Pitcairn, the physician who had been in charge of his own case. Chance directed that the doctor had been called out. Charles went on to his work, leaving his sister's emergency to await the passage of the day. Mary's emergencies had always been emergencies that could wait.

In the late afternoon the tea-table stood ready laid at home, in momentary expectation of Charles's return from work. Mary had been sewing hard all day, trying to complete an order with the help of her apprentice. At this moment, because of some mistake made by her helper, she became madly enraged and attacked the girl violently. When the apprentice ran away from her, Mary pursued her frantically, throwing the knives and forks from the table after her.

Mrs. Lamb entered the fray on behalf of the apprentice. She called from her chair to her daughter, bidding her to desist. But the long-suppressed archaic fury within Mary had been released and raged now in full storm. With a knife from the table, Mary rushed over to the chair where her mother sat, and plunged it straight into the woman's heart.

She must have seen the act performed bloodlessly many times at the Drury Lane Theatre. She must have enacted the scene many times in her secret thoughts to have been so expert in the real crisis.

### CHAPTER III

#### *Probation*

THE idol of Mary Lamb's virgin heart, dawdling home from India House, entered the room expecting to find his tea ready as usual. The spindle-legged, glittering-eyed Charles beheld a scene the like of which had never been approached in all the previous crises of his family history. His mother's limp body lay in a chair; his grey-haired father, weeping, wiped the blood from his forehead, where one of Mary's forks had accidentally struck him; his old aunt lay stretched out on the floor, mercifully senseless. The girl whose misdeeds had touched off the fatal explosion had vanished through the door before Charles entered the apartment. Mary stood over her mother's dead body with the dripping knife in her hand. Charles went up to her and took the weapon from her.

The week that followed sufficed for almost all the important events which followed the crime. The coroner's inquest was held on the next day, which was Friday. No details reached the newspapers, but Charles must have been the principal witness. Old John Lamb, unable to testify, sat in the adjoining room playing cards with one of Charles's loyal Christ's Hospital friends. On Saturday night the wake was held. About twenty people feasted and made merry in the Lambs' apartment. On Sunday the dead woman was laid to rest in St. Andrew's Churchyard, Holborn. On Monday the *Morning Chronicle* contained an account of the results of the coroner's inquest. The next day Charles Lamb wrote a full letter to Coleridge telling him the details of the story; and on the day after that, Coleridge replied with the well-known letter of sympathy and consolation. Almost all the essential acts of the murderous drama were therewith concluded.

During this time Charles had stood in mortal terror of his brother John. John had shown little sympathy with Charles's mental illness in the previous winter and had blamed him for it. How John would react to this second desperate outbreak of

mental disorder in the family had been Charles's first thought. In terror he burnt his verses, his letters, his journal, his poetic effusions of every kind. He confided Coleridge's letters to the safe keeping of a friend. His first impulse was to look on John, his mother's favourite, as the instrument of vengeance and to place himself, by old childish habit, by his sister's side. He feared that Coleridge might in some way again be implicated. 'I charge you, don't think of coming to see me', he warned; 'I will not see you if you come.'

The emotional strain under which he laboured might well have called back his recent illness. But this he escaped. 'God be praised,' he confided to Coleridge, 'wonderful as it is to tell, I have never once been otherwise than collected and calm; even on the dreadful day, and in the midst of the terrible scene, I preserved a tranquillity . . . not of despair,—is it folly or sin in me to say that it was a religious principle that *most* supported me? I allow much to other favourable circumstances. I felt that I had something else to do than to regret . . . I closed not my eyes in sleep that night, but lay without terrors and without despair. I have lost no sleep since.' Only once did the resolute manikin break down. This happened on the cruel night of the wake, when he darted from the midst of the carousing company and collapsed in 'an agony of emotion' beside his mother's coffin. His collapse, however, was transient. From some inner living source he suddenly drew resources of self-control that carried him through the ensuing days with dignity and composure.

It is often said of Charles Lamb that he alone took full charge of the shipwrecked household and steered it through to comparative safety. What seems more likely is that helpful friends came to the rescue. Only one of them, Randal Norris, a minor official of the Inner Temple, became actually visible. Charles's great merit in the crises was that his keen intelligence overcame his much spoiled character and functioned for the time independently. It warned him wisely to forget drama for once and to obey orders. But in view of his mental weakness, his response was heroic.

Charles's letter to Coleridge about the murder combines real pathos with good reporting. It was not written until the most critical stages of his sister's tragedy had been surmounted. Her life at least, whatever its future, had been guaranteed before he trusted himself to put words on paper

even for Coleridge's perusal. 'White or some of my friends or the public papers', he wrote, 'by this time may have informed you of the terrible calamities that have fallen on our family. I will only give you the outlines. My poor dear, dearest sister, in a fit of insanity, has been the death of her own mother. I was at hand only time enough to snatch the knife out of her grasp. She is at present in a mad house, from whence I fear she must be moved to an hospital. God has preserved to me my senses,—I eat and drink and sleep, and have my judgement, I believe, very sound. My poor father was slightly wounded, and I am left to take care of him and my aunt. Mr. Norris of the Bluecoat school has been very, very kind to us, and we have no other friend, but thank God I am very calm and composed, and able to do the best that remains to do. Write,—as religious a letter as possible—but no mention of what is gone and done with.—With me "the former things are passed away", and I have something more to do than to feel —God almighty have us all in his keeping —C Lamb'

To this letter Charles added a postscript containing the admonition to Coleridge on no account to come to see him. Terror still reigned in his heart in spite of the quieting result of the inquest

On Monday, the 25th of September 1796, the people in the clubs and coffee-houses of London read in the *Morning Chronicle* the following notice

'On Friday afternoon, the Coroner and a respectable Jury sat on the body of a Lady in the neighbourhood of Holborn, who died in consequence of a wound from her daughter the preceding day.' Then followed a brief narrative of Thursday's events as we already know them, and the narrative then concluded. 'It seems that the young lady had been once before in her earlier years deranged, from the harassing fatigues of too much business —As her carriage towards her mother was ever affectionate in the extreme, it is believed that to the increased attentiveness, which her parents' infirmities called for by day and night, is to be attributed the present insanity of this ill-fated young woman. It has been stated in some of the *Morning Papers*, that she has an insane brother also in confinement—this is without foundation. The Jury, of course, brought in their Verdict, *Lunacy*.' This was all Neither the name nor the exact address of the fate-stricken family was mentioned;



the notice was framed in accordance with the best journalistic politeness of the day.

Some of the details suggest an editorial touching-up on the side of the defence. The statement that Mary had an insane brother in confinement was not true, but it was not without foundation, as the article asserted. Charles had been in the asylum within less than a year. The statement that Mary herself had been once before deranged has no discoverable basis. It appears here for the first time in any record, though it was afterwards constantly repeated. There are several reasons for doubting it, only one of which is that it was terribly important at the moment to establish Mary's lunacy. The best reason is Coleridge's poem addressed to Charles on the occasion of Mary's only previously known illness. It clearly refers to an ordinary physical complaint of some kind and not a mental derangement.

## 2

The dead hand of Samuel Salt still reached out in benevolence to protect his servant's progeny. Some strong legal support from the Inner Temple had been promptly forthcoming; otherwise the outcome might have been fatally different. Mary Lamb was certainly threatened for some moments with the fate of the famous Mary Blandy.

Miss Blandy's trial for the murder of her father went back more than forty years, but her legend was still fresh in the minds of the public. Her trial had been an episode of classic importance. There are still in existence pamphlets, ballads, and engravings picturing the beautiful and refined young lady in Oxford prison and on the scaffold. Going to her death, she had said these last words: 'Gentlemen, do not hang me high for the sake of decency'. Her delicacy and refinement did much to heighten her fame as a martyr. She had a party in her time and the legend she left continued to arouse excited defence. The Blandy case was unforgettable history.

Her story remained especially alive in the Temple, the home of the law. It lingered on vividly during the lifetime of the young Lambs. Charles Lamb remembered it from his youth and incorporated it in one of his essays, 'Old Benchers of the Inner Temple'. He attached it to the characterization of Samuel

Salt. The Temple barristers would have longer memories for such legal milestones than the general public. Those in charge of Mary Lamb's case would have realized that under no circumstances should she be brought before a criminal jury. The long-drawn-out trial of Mary Blandy had allowed the introduction of partisan politics, to the play of which, super-added to action of the criminal law, she had eventually succumbed. No delay or legal bungling of any kind was allowed to occur in the case of the old Temple waiter's daughter. Matters were pushed through with the utmost celerity. To this untarrying expert assistance Mary Lamb owed her immunity and her almost total escape from justice. The coroner's jury ignored the question of crime altogether and convicted her solely of mental derangement. 'The verdict was, of course, lunacy.'

The year 1796—the year of Mary's crime—fell in the midst of the repressive anti-revolutionary acts in England. They were administered by the Home Secretary's Office, which had in consequence been turned into an active court of justice. The peculiarity of the Home Secretary was that he was not a legal justice, not even a lawyer, but a political appointee. The incumbent of the office in Mary Lamb's time was the famous Whig leader, the third Duke of Portland.

The Duke had maintained for half a lifetime intimate relations with William Plumer of Blakesware. Samuel Salt had been in his time a not wholly negligible and obscure friend of both. Under their patronage he had secured and held his place in Parliament. Portland had always treated Salt with great deference, although his Duchess had referred to him, not over-respectfully, as the 'Saline gentleman'. The humble Lambs, as faithful retainers of Salt, thus found the way open to highly-placed friends. It was certainly not in the books that a crime should have to be condoned; but once it had been committed, the loyalty of old alliances asserted itself. Mary Lamb's case was exclusively handled, in so far as any notice was taken of it, in the Duke of Portland's office. The casual disposition of a murder case in this instance, a subject on which so much surprised comment has since been made, can partly be explained as a result of long-grooved political circumstances.

Mary had been taken away immediately after her desperate act. She had been removed at once, probably by Charles and Dr. Pitcairn, to a private asylum in Islington. Beyond the fact that the asylum was not Charles's recent place of internment, Mary's retreat cannot now be identified. Charles's asylum was in Hoxton, a pretty sordid institution if we may judge it by the description given by John Hollingshead in the memoirs of his boyhood. Hollingshead lived next door to the Hoxton hospital and portrays it in this passage: 'I had my faults, I admit. I was too fond of exciting the poor maniacs in the yard of the private mad house. When they were pacing up and down in the monotonous way common amongst mad people, I used to get up at my little window and attract their attention. When I had got their eyes well fixed, I indulged in the wildest antics, showing a desire to get out and bite them, until the whole yard was in a boiling frenzy. Before the keepers appeared I dipped down out of sight and only peeped to enjoy the bewilderment of these officers.' Charles Lamb's sojourn among the maniacs was unfortunately not so timed as to allow him to enjoy this diverting performance.

Hollingshead gives some further details about the numerous madhouses in and around Hoxton, which varied from shabby institutions to establishments of great elegance. Mary's asylum must have been somewhere in between the two extremes, inasmuch as Charles paid reasonably well for her detention.

The alternative punishment which threatened Mary Lamb was that of being removed from Islington and shut up in Bedlam. If her brother had not already been insane before the murder was committed, she might have gone straightway to Bedlam. This horrible public charity, endowed by Henry VIII for the incurable insane, flaunted its barbarous and sadistic existence in the very heart of London. For the payment of a small fee visitors could go inside and see its tortured inmates lying in chains. As a child, Mary had of course seen Bedlam plain and had been long terrified of it, as all London children must have been. 'She had often as she passed Bedlam', said Charles, 'thought it likely, "here it may be my fate to end my days".' And now this childish terror threatened to become a ghastly reality.

Edmund Blunden says: 'I have been informed that in our

advanced system Mary Lamb must inevitably have been sent to Broadmoor' But under the Home Secretary's ruling Mary's two brothers were left to settle her fate between them. This they did, as many brothers might have done, on the basis of finance John would have sent Mary to Bedlam for life, mainly because it would have cost nothing. Charles won the argument by himself assuming the expense of a private institution. An acquiescent authority stood by while the disposition of a criminal case was thus privately adjusted. The danger of Bedlam passed away and Mary remained in peaceful durance at Islington.

Charles outlined the settlement in a letter to Coleridge 'We have, Daddy and I, for ourselves and an old maid-servant to look after him, when I am out, which will be necessary, £170 or £180 (rather) a year, out of which we can spare £50 or £60 at least for Mary, while she stays at Islington, where she must and shall stay during her father's life, for his and her comfort. I know John will make speeches about it, but she shall not go into a [public] hospital. . . .

'A legacy of £100, which my father will have at Christmas, and this £20 I mentioned before, with what is in the house, will much more than set us clear;—if my father, an old servant-maid, and I can't live comfortably on £130 or £120 a year, we ought to burn by slow fires; and I almost would, that Mary might not go into an hospital. . . . The lady at this mad house assures me that I may dismiss immediately both doctor and apothecary . . . and there is a less expensive establishment in her house . . . for £50 or guineas a year—the outside would be £60. . . .'

## 4

The handling of Mary Lamb's matricidal attack raises a question concerning the psychiatry of her time. The science was far in advance of what one might suppose from the existence of a barbarous place like Bedlam. The large number of private asylums which had sprung up in the country were a measure of the popular reaction to its medieval horrors. The Quakers had founded a hospital for the humane treatment of the insane. London boasted of specialists for mental diseases whose reputations have justly survived to this day. One of the most prominent of them was Dr. David Pitcairn, the physician who cared

on my aunt's living many years; she was a very hearty old woman. But she was a mere skeleton before she died, and looked more like a corpse that had lain weeks in the grave than one fresh dead'

Aunt Sarah was laid in the same grave with her lifelong enemy, Elizabeth Lamb. Here old John Lamb came to lie also, when his time came. Long afterwards the bodies were removed to St. James's Churchyard in Clerkenwell, when the great Holborn Viaduct swept away the churchyard along with the scene of matricide.

## 6

On the tenth day of her confinement in the infirmary Mary Lamb recovered her senses. After a brief entombment in darkness and horror she rose again to a commonplace life. 'My poor, dear, dearest sister,' wrote Charles, 'the unhappy and unconscious instrument of the Almighty's judgements to our house, is restored to her senses. . . . I have seen her.' He went on: 'She is restored to a dreadful sense and recollection of what has past, awful to her mind, and impressive (as it must be to the end of life), but tempered with religious resignation, and the reasonings of a sound judgement, which in this early stage knows how to distinguish between a deed committed in a transient state of frenzy and the terrible guilt of a mother's murthur.' Not then, nor for a long time afterwards, were Charles and Mary allowed to be alone together. But Charles paid regular visits to the asylum, and Mary thenceforth knew all that was happening at home and what was being done about the disposition of her case. She knew of the death of Aunt Sarah, whom she never saw again in life, and of the senile degeneration of her old father, who registered nothing of the tornado that had passed. She took heart from the sympathy of Coleridge, whose letters she and Charles read together in the visiting-room of the asylum.

After her recovery Charles kept her well supplied with books, assiduously borrowing for the purpose; for, as he said, 'reading was her daily bread'. He explained to Coleridge, however, that she 'had her hands too full of work to read much', for she paid part of her keep in services rendered. She remained 'serene and cheerful', and remarkably friendly with

the nurses of the institution. Charles's devotion and loyalty continued unchanged. He had moved the family, including his father and bedridden aunt, to Chapel Street in Pentonville in order to be nearer to Mary's asylum. The old close companionship of brother and sister revived in the pursuit of Charles's literary work, in which Mary had always had an important part. But the hope for any closer reunion was temporarily absent. 'You and Sara are very good to think so kindly and so favourably of poor Mary', wrote Charles to Coleridge. 'I would to God all did so too.'

His letters to Coleridge express his first reflection on Mary's deed. Charles set forth with firm moral courage to face the reality of what had happened. 'These relatively good fortunes [Mary's recovery, etc.] . . .', he wrote, 'had almost brought my mind over to . . . the very opposite to despair; I was in danger of making myself too happy; your letter brought me back to a view of things which I had entertained from the beginning; I hope (for Mary I can[not] answer) but I hope that I shall through life never have less recollection nor a fainter impression of what has happened than I have now. . . . I must be serious, circumspect, and deeply religious through life; by such means may *both* of us escape madness in future, if it so please the Almighty.'

In his first letters he made many references to his dead mother, to the evil day, and the pangs of his grief. But Mary, though supposedly restored to full sanity, never once showed in the mirroring letters of her brother a face that was turned towards the actual facts. She could not brook the savage picture of her own deed. In her extremity she invented a visionary substitute, a phantasmal reconciliation with the woman she had slain. 'At midnight when I happen to awake, the nurse sleeping by the side of me, with the noise of the poor mad people around me, I have no fear. The spirit of my mother seems to descend, and smile upon me, and bid me live to enjoy the life and reason which the Almighty has given me; I shall see her again in heaven.' Charles gradually accepted this picture in place of the clear recollection and true impression he had resolved to retain. Mary's older and stronger spirit prevailed. As their old companionship became reinstated, Charles fell back into the position in which Mary was the leader. So Charles, too, in time, ceased to speak of his mother.

His last reference to her in print occurred in the first stanza of 'Old Familiar Faces', written about a year after her death. But when the poem was reprinted several years later, he struck out the lines.

The literary friends of Charles and Mary fell tactfully into the conspiracy to repress the memory of the dead woman. The attitude of their legal advisers, some of them important public figures, helped to deepen the general silence surrounding the story. The tacit evasion spread in literary circles, where it became, in the years to come, almost taboo to mention the truth about Mary Lamb's mother. The repression became in time a kind of literary convention. It almost causes one a shock to find John Hollingshead saying in his *Memoirs* in 1895 that Mary Lamb murdered her mother. Everything from the verdict of the jury onward combined to spare her the pain of the dreadful memory.

Indeed, how could poor weak human flesh as represented by this sensitive Mary stand up to the ordeal of facing the facts? But the poor sick-minded woman nevertheless lost thereby her only chance for recovery. The treatment was too merciful. Charles Lamb, who was psychologically shrewder than the others, failed to carry out his intention of always holding before him the memory of the evil day 'through life'.

The mother had been dead only a few short weeks when Charles wrote to Coleridge: 'Poor Mary, my mother *never understood* her right. She loved her, as she loved us all, with a mother's love; but in opinion, in feeling, and sentiment, and disposition, bore so distant a resemblance to her daughter that she never understood her right. Never could believe how much *she* loved her, but met her caresses, her protestations of filial affection, too frequently with coldness and repulse. Still she was a good mother; God forbid I should think of her but *most* respectfully, *most* affectionately. Yet she would always love my brother above Mary, who was not worthy of one tenth of the affection which Mary had a right to claim.'

Surely Elizabeth Lamb had paid enough for her foolish behaviour as a mother. But the instrument of vengeance, Mary, and Mary's advocate Charles, could not yet rise to the human height of ordinary simple pity for her. After all the blood and sacrifice the old grudge still poisoned the memories of the brother and sister. The prognosis for Mary was not good.

At the end of six months in the asylum, Mary was allowed to leave. Early in April 1797 she moved into a furnished room in Hackney. Charles's efforts, aided by those of his Inner Temple friends, procured for her this amount of freedom. Lamb's biographer Talfourd declares that the authorities conditioned Mary's release upon Charles's 'solemn engagement that he would take her under his care for life'. A further required condition was that she should not return to her father's roof. The authorities seem to have entertained some anxiety about the feeble old man's life. Talfourd, who consulted Lamb's old friends on the subject, remarks: 'Whether any communication with the Home Secretary occurred before her release I have been unable to ascertain' He adds that he was under the impression, however, that such a communication had taken place. As a Temple barrister and later as a justice of the court Talfourd must have known the facts or might have discovered them had he cared to. But he did not choose to tell what he knew or what he could have found out; so we are still left guessing as to how this curious instance of probation arose in connexion with Mary Lamb's case.

The decision to banish Mary from her home for the rest of her father's life was a hard sentence for Charles and Mary to accept. But her release made up for all. Charles's letters to Coleridge fell away during the transfer of Mary from Islington to Hackney. He then wrote, casually: 'By the way, Lloyd may have told you about my sister. I told him. If not, I have taken her out of her confinement, and taken a room for her at Hackney, and spend my Sundays, holidays, etc with her. She boards herself' Hackney was situated well out in the country to the north of London. But Charles's lodgings in Pentonville were within a reasonable walking distance as walking was practised in those days.

Mary moved to Hackney in the spring. The fields and gardens unfolded their tender green and flowers bloomed before the cottages. She took up her sewing again, and for a time earned her living. Charles came regularly to visit her, to write his poems, and to bring his latest treasures from the book-stalls. His verses of the time, formal and imitative, show how very much occupied he was with stereotyped projects. But life in Hackney had many elements that contributed to Mary's



recovery, and Charles's literary activity, mechanical as it was, helped them both.

At midsummer Charles unexpectedly received his long-awaited holiday. Coleridge had again invited him to his home at Nether Stowey, whither he had moved from Bristol. With scarcely a note of warning, Charles precipitated himself breathlessly upon the bosom of his old friend. On one of the first long days in July, the dark, quaint refugee from pain and sorrow burst impetuously in upon the Coleridge household. Charles had need to be comforted by his old idol of the Salutation and Cat days.

## 8

Events had followed one another quickly in Coleridge's life. He had moved his Sarah and her baby to Nether Stowey in order to take in a well-paying guest and pupil. At first enthusiastic about Charles Lloyd, the guest and pupil, he too quickly sensed the thinness and juvenility of Lloyd's poetic talent. As no consideration of the grocer's bill could ever induce Coleridge to tolerate the second-rate in literature, his interest in the new disciple soon cooled off. With his consent, Lloyd paid many visits to London and at length paid one visit from which he did not return. Coleridge found himself lonely and yearning with only Sarah for company. Harkening to the spiritual life outside the domestic haven, he thought that he again heard the strains of a true poet. Throwing all considerations to the wind, he dashed off to the home of the singer, a place called Racedown. This time he was not mistaken. The genius he had selected from some random early verses was William Wordsworth.

Without any delay he moved Wordsworth and his sister, Dorothy, to Nether Stowey. Borne thither by Coleridge's whirlwind, they arrived in June. Mrs. Coleridge had scarcely had time to become accustomed to them as neighbours when the swift approach of another peculiar friend of her husband's, Charles Lamb, was announced. Nor was this all. Coleridge had generously invited John Thelwall also, the 'citizen' and French sympathizer, who had just been released from prison. Further still, a government detective followed close after Thelwall to keep an eye on him. Mrs. Coleridge's position among these exciting strangers was truly one to excite some

degree of sympathy. She was paying the first penalty of the distinction of being Coleridge's wife.

Nor did Coleridge himself escape entirely the consequences of his impetuous acts. 'The second day after Wordsworth . . . came to me,' he chronicled, 'dear Sara accidentally spilled a skillet of boiling milk on my foot, which confined me during the whole time of C Lamb's stay and still [during Thelwall's visit] prevents me from all walks longer than a furlong.' But the spirit of the poet still soared on splendid wings and no awkwardness of his distracted wife nor pain of his own availed to cramp them. From the midst of his domestic crisis he rose triumphant to sing 'This Lime-tree Bower My Prison', one of the most beautiful of his poems:

*Well, they are gone and here must I remain,  
Lam'd by the scathe of fire, lonely and faint,  
This lime-tree bower my prison! They, meantime,  
My friends, whom I may never meet again,  
On springy heath, along the hill-top edge,  
Wander delighted, and look down, perchance,  
On that same rifted Deel, where many an ash  
Twists its wild limbs beside the ferny rock  
Whose plummy ferns forever nod and drip,  
Spray'd by the waterfall But chiefly there  
My gentle-hearted Charles! thou who had pin'd  
And hunger'd after Nature many a year,  
In the great City pent, winning thy way  
With sad yet patient soul, through evil and pain,  
And strange calamity!*

When Charles returned home from this visit, he exhibited a rather pensive and downcast mood. He had seen his adored Coleridge in a new and inspired relationship. His own place and Mary's had been well taken by William and Dorothy Wordsworth. While he and his sister lay crushed beneath the heel of fate, Wordsworth and Dorothy had been rising to new eminences of achievement, and Coleridge had been rising with them. It did not strike him as flattering, apparently, that Coleridge had sought another friendship for his heart similar to his old relation with him and his sister. He seemed to forget that Coleridge had, in spite of all, neither neglected nor forsaken him during his recent ordeal. Such considerations seem to have escaped Charles Lamb, who returned to London

depressed and ready to make common cause with Coleridge's errant disciple, Charles Lloyd. The rift that followed between the two friends is often attributed by Lamb's biographers to Coleridge's jealousy of Lloyd. The trouble arose as much from Lamb's childish, if understandable, jealousy of the Wordsworths at Nether Stowey, and of the triangular genius there which was even then pregnant with the *Lyrical Ballads*.

Once back in his Pentonville routine, Lamb threw himself into new literary work. He started a novel, *Rosamund Gray*, and a play, *John Woodvil*. He had a great loss to make up, having burned all his early manuscripts in the hour of Mary's danger. His novel grew out of his friendship with Charles Lloyd, who was engaged on a work of fiction at the same time. Lloyd had found a convenient lodging with Lamb's old friend James White. His intimacy with Lamb lasted only about a year. He seems to have avoided Mary and to have tried to influence Charles to pay her less attention.

The connexion with Lloyd proved an unhappy one for Lamb. It is true that Lamb wrote *Rosamund Gray* while under the influence of his new affinity and that he succeeded in getting it published with Lloyd's assistance in the latter's home town, Birmingham. Lamb became extremely intimate with Lloyd's family in the course of their friendship and took a meddlesome interest in all their affairs. His visits to their Birmingham home, and a renewed correspondence with Robert Southey, who was also alienated from Coleridge, occupied much of his time for the next year. But none of this elevated social and epistolary activity netted Lamb anything real.

The Lloyds and the Southesys, middle class to the marrow, could never wholly forget Lamb's humble origin. Coleridge was incapable of looking askance at a person because of his birth. His friendship with Charles and Mary was, in this respect, pure. Only loneliness and jealousy could have sent Charles Lamb so far afield and on so vain a search. But he craved intimate friendship above all else.

During all this time one hears little of Mary, miraculously retrieved from justice and hidden in a cottage in Hackney. By his own confession, Charles forgot his brave vow for a time

and neglected her. He seemed, in fact, more upset in his moral equilibrium by the loss of Coleridge than by the desperate affairs of his sister. It so happens in life sometimes that a lesser evil, following upon a greater, produces the more serious shock.

But it was not Charles's neglect alone that precipitated Mary again over the brink. Much deeper causes were required for her second fall. Of her own choice she had kept the dark forces coiled within her ready to spring. They broke loose again on Christmas Day of 1797, in the dull quiet of her Hackney lodging. Charles took her at once to Islington, to her former asylum.

At this recurrence of her frenzy, Charles was as much tormented in soul as previously—perhaps more so. He now realized the force of the physicians' warning: that her disease was recurrent and incurable. 'I consider Mary as perpetually on the brink of madness', he wrote to Coleridge; for in his great unhappiness he turned again to his old friend. Although absorbed in rapturous creation with Wordsworth, Coleridge responded at once with ready sympathy. He promptly sent an invitation to Mary to convalesce at Nether Stowey. Fortunately for Mrs. Coleridge, Charles declined the kindly and impulsive proposal. 'Your invitation went to my very heart; but you have a power of exciting interest, of leading all hearts captive, too favourable to admit of Mary's being with you. . . . I think you would almost make her dance within an inch of the precipice; she must be with duller fancies and cooler intellects. I know a young man of this description, who has suited her these twenty years, and may live to do so still, if we are one day restored to each other.'

One may assume that it was a part of Charles's contract as Mary's guardian that, on showing any returning symptoms of mania, she should be confined at once in an asylum. This time she recovered after six weeks and went back to her life in Hackney. As for Charles, after this second ordeal had passed, he immediately resumed his dalliance with Lloyd and Southey.

Lloyd's novel, *Edmund Oliver*, appeared the following summer. The hero was founded in part on Coleridge's life and

character. The fatal word 'laudanum' became then first attached to Coleridge's reputation. The mischievous book was dedicated 'with affection' to Charles Lamb. At this point Coleridge's long patience with Lamb gave way, and he wrote some quarrelsome letters to him. He was doubtless annoyed by Lloyd's *Edmund Olver* and its revelations about himself. But the deep hurt could only come from Lamb, whom he regarded with real affection.

While this personal quarrel had been brewing, the political agents of the government had been busy selecting victims for propaganda activities. As a result Charles Lamb achieved the political limelight for the first and last time in his life. Still a relatively obscure author, just past twenty-three, he awoke one morning to find himself a famous radical. George Canning's *Anti-Jacobin* had pilloried him along with a large and distinguished company. In a heavily humorous cartoon, since become historical, Lamb was pictured as a toad and Charles Lloyd as a frog, piping their notes together. Coleridge, Southey, and William Godwin stood by, braying in chorus as donkeys. Tom Paine joined in with the wicked jaws of a crocodile. Joseph Priestley, Thomas Wakefield, and John Thelwall trilled away as French citizens; while Justice, Philanthropy, and Sensibility croaked in the form of the most dreadful hags imaginable. Canning's cynicism had allowed itself full vent in this elaborately constructed compound of art and humour.

Charles Lamb must have been surprised to find himself taken so seriously. He was the least politically minded of persons, though he belonged of course by feeling and temperament to the Liberal ranks. What happened to him at India House as a result of his being lampooned is not mentioned. Probably nothing. Lamb's friendship with Lloyd waned, however, immediately afterwards—a result that was not to be entirely regretted.

## 11

While Charles achieved this brief notoriety, Mary lived in strict seclusion and anonymity at Hackney. She observed religiously the rule against seeing her father. Old John Lamb was daily growing weaker. Charles wrote some of his most touching lines on the last days of his father. 'I saw him in his old age

and the decay of his faculties, palsy-smitten, in the last sad stage of human weakness—a remnant most forlorn of what he was—yet even then his eye would light up upon the mention of his favourite Garrick. . . . At intervals, too, he would speak of his former life, and how he came up a little boy from Lincoln to go to service, and how his mother cried at parting with him, and how he returned, after some few years' absence, in his smart new livery to see her, and she blest herself at the change, and could hardly be brought to believe that it was her own bairn. And then, the excitement subsiding, he would weep, till I have wished that sad second-childhood might have a mother still to lay its head upon her lap. But the common mother of us all in no long time after received him gently into hers.'

Having no correspondent at the time of his father's death (Coleridge was in Germany), Charles left none of his tender and whimsical letters to chronicle the event. But his subsequent letters reveal that Mary returned home immediately afterwards. The bond had been fulfilled. Charles changed his residence at this time. Whether the landlord at 45, Chapel Street objected to Mary's presence or whether Lamb had then developed the habit of fleeing the scene of pain, he shifted at once to 36, Chapel Street. Mary's long banishment of a year and a half was over.

She rested at last in her home. Charles's old maidservant had not been dismissed. His salary, increased by £10 every year, was now sufficient to allow Mary this luxury in her new life. A quiet, peaceful summer followed—a summer almost like a honeymoon, as Charles pictures it in 'Old China'. The reunited pair collected old prints and folios, went picnicking on holidays, and occasionally attended the theatre. For many months they lived in studied retirement, having no wish to expose Mary's restoration to her home to general comment. Charles had long foreseen the necessity. 'I fear tongues will be busy', he had said, '*whenever* that event takes place.' Thus they went peacefully forward in the rebuilding of their common life.

At the beginning of 1800 the quiet of their routine was interrupted by a visit from Coleridge. He had just returned from spending a year at a German university. Cooled and sobered by the long separation, Lamb made the first advances; and Coleridge, always generous to Lamb, responded warmly. He was soon accommodated, somehow, in the tiny lodging. He

made his fine translation of Schiller's *Wallenstein* under Lamb's roof.

He also introduced more intellectual and literary excitement into their days than they had known in a long time. Then Coleridge departed; and the old maidservant died. The social strain and the death in the house broke Mary again, and she had to be sent back to the Islington asylum. While she was there, Charles moved out of the tiny lodging where he and Mary had been so happy for a year. He wandered aimlessly about for several weeks, homeless in body and soul. Meeting a former comrade of the Feathers Tavern days, he went home with him. John Mathew Gutch mothered Lamb for several weeks, taking him down to visit his family at Oxford and assigning to him finally a portion of his own Southampton Building lodgings. So Mary, coming home from the asylum, returned once more to London.

During this third absence of Mary's, Lamb was indeed in a pitiable condition. He had leaned hard on his year of respite at Pentonville, and the return of misfortune, though he should have expected it, had struck him down, limp and resourceless. His letter to Coleridge has the old simple sincerity which had been noticeably lacking in his correspondence with Lloyd and Southey. 'My heart is quite sunk', he wrote, 'and I don't know where to look for relief. Mary will get better again; but her constantly being liable to such relapses is dreadful; nor is it the least of our evils that her case and all our story is so well known around us. We are in a manner *marked*. Excuse my troubling you; but I have nobody by me to speak to me. I slept out last night, not being able to endure the change and stillness. But I did not sleep well, and I must come back to my own bed. I am going to try to get a friend to come and be with me to-morrow. I am completely shipwrecked. My head is quite bad. I almost wish that Mary were dead.'

Charles seemed at last to realize what he had to look forward to for the rest of his life. The forecast was too true. Psychiatrists nowadays would give the specialized name of manic-depressive psychosis to Mary Lamb's mental ailment. It is not easy to give a description of the condition in ordinary untech-

nical language, but the main points of the disorder belong to Mary Lamb's personal history. She confessed to both characteristic phases of the disease—extreme depression and extreme excitement. Whatever brought on her attacks, the attack itself was sometimes mania, sometimes melancholia. A second important feature of the manic-depressive condition is to produce no permanently deteriorating effect; the victim maintains his usual mentality, unimpaired or even developing, to the ultimate end. This is strikingly illustrated in Mary Lamb's attacks, from each of which she returned to take her usual place in Charles Lamb's life. Her feat in this regard proved even more astonishing as the years went on.

It has been repeatedly stated that insanity was in Mary Lamb's family. But no dependable evidence of the statement has ever been adduced. In her immediate family, her father, her aunt, and (as far as we know) her mother were all mentally sound. The senility of John Lamb's old age crops up, it is true. But his long and active previous life presents no sign of any marked eccentricity. The taint has been sometimes ascribed, not to him, but to his side of the family. The theory obviously sprang from the mystery maintained by the younger Lambs about their Lamb ancestry. There is no positive indication of mental illness among John Lamb's connexions.

The statement that insanity existed in John Lamb's family was first made by Talfourd in 1848. But the Justice showed little regard for evidence as related to mere biography. He produces nothing factual in support of his statement. A second author who stands equally high as an authority on Charles Lamb is Canon Alfred Ainger. The Canon made at different times completely contradictory statements. In a full-length biography of Charles Lamb he wrote that insanity was hereditary in Lamb's father's family. Subsequently writing in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, he asserted that the hereditary taint was transmitted by Lamb's mother, Elizabeth Field. Could it be that Ainger had found out something definite about Mrs. Lamb in the course of his long researches as Canon in the Temple, where the Lambs lived for so long? The mother is the unknown quantity in the family history. If so, he did not offer it as a reason for his change of statement. It is worthy of note that Charles Lamb, in discussing Mary's illness in his letters, says not a word about insanity on either side of his family.



It would be a further confirmation of Mary Lamb's type of illness to establish the fact of hereditary influence. Of all kinds of psychoses, the manio-depressive type shows the greatest frequency of hereditary origin. But in her case no reliable records of such a fact have been found up to date. The most that can be said about her assumably sane heredity is to quote the opinion of Dr. Smith Ely Jelliffe, the leading American authority on her disease. 'It is possible that a manio-depressive can turn up in a family without any traceable ancestral similitude.'

We shall have to suppose that Mary's mania-melancholia was of this exceptional order. The only ancestors of hers who can positively be convicted of insane violence reach so far back into history that she shares them with everyone. Deep within her, as within all of us, lay baleful instincts, ever living and ever seeking for a loophole of escape. It was Mary's tragic destiny that they had a chance to break out.

#### CHAPTER IV

### *Social Success*

CHARLES LAMB had at last emerged from adolescence as a full-fledged personality. After his sister's third attack of insanity he showed definite signs of having suddenly become a man. If he wished that 'Mary were dead', he realized that his wish had no likelihood of being granted. He knew by this time the nature of the curse that hung over him. To the end of his life he would be paying the blood-price of his mother's untimely end. A philosophy born of despair rose in his heart and he scratched it valiantly into a letter to Coleridge: 'I am determined to take what snatches of pleasure we can, between the acts of our distressful drama'.

Since the age of seventeen he had been sitting on a high accountant's stool in the Long Room of India House. He was now twenty-five. Charles Lamb was genuinely the scrivener which John Lamb, the waiter, had purported to be. Charles had developed a clerk's hand for his trade which differed from his letter-writing hand. In the Long Room many other accountants on high stools at high tables drove their quill pens across the pages of ponderous ledgers. Among them Charles Lamb, always dressed in brown homespun and always quick with repartee, had his special place. He had sat there through his terrible calamity, through the anti-Jacobin attack, and through his sister's painful relapses. Despite late hours and convivial habits, he was always on hand, working daily from ten to four. A vein of integrity, truly surprising in the face of his circumstances and weaknesses, ran through his character. Whatsoever and whomsoever he passed for elsewhere, at India House he was the respected and slowly rising clerk, Mr. Charles Lamb.

Up to this time Charles had shown few signs of humour. Now it burst forth suddenly, like a spring tulip. Its full-blown appearance came to take the place of former sentimentality, giving his letters of that period a new and springlike freshness.

Everybody saved Lamb's letters and he was an indefatigable letter-writer. His missives of 1800 were not only merry but unusually numerous. As at so many critical junctures of his life, he had just given up literature for ever. Instead, he poured out his talent, freshened and invigorated by the latest welcome element, in letter after letter to his friends.

Lamb was not unaware of the change in himself. Coleridge republished the 'Lime-tree Bower' in 1800 and Lamb thereupon promptly wrote to him: 'For God's sake (I never was more serious), don't make me ridiculous any more by terming me gentlehearted in print, or do it in better verses. It did well enough five years ago when I came to see you, and was moral coxcomb enough to feed upon such epithets; but, besides that, the meaning of gentle is equivocal at best, and almost always means poor-spirited,—the very quality of gentleness is abhorrent to such vile trumpeting. My *sentiment* is long since vanished. I hope my *virtues* have done *sucking*.' One might suggest at this point that Lamb did protest too much. But other things bear out the genuineness of his conversion. He saw his present life with the kind of objectivity that belongs only to maturity. The wisplike, wraithlike, stuttering creature had suddenly become, within, a man.

Charles Lamb's father had been a humorist in his good days. Charles had loved and admired the old man. Now that the father had gone to the grave, the son could forget the tottering wreck and revive the memory of his father as he had once known him. This was more or less the pattern of a professional jester, a master of revels, a faithful follower of the departed Beau Nash. It was natural that Lamb should cast himself at this epoch of his life in the mould he had inherited. Mary's return home, with all the pain and trouble that it brought, undoubtedly cheered him also. Their devotion had sustained many threats and trials and had survived them all. A note of victory and success had crowned their prolonged tragedy; and in their paradoxical history they had won through to a kind of happiness. Charles's humour, born out of deeply satisfied emotional needs, had come to alleviate the pangs of his first grief; and, so comforting him, had come to stay. The sadness of his humour was to make him famous.

The Lambs' migration to Southampton Buildings took place in May 1800. They lived in a portion of John Mathew Gutch's apartment for almost a year. Though old in each other's remembrance, Lamb and Gutch had never been intimate friends and did not become so through propinquity. Charles's lack of appreciation of Gutch's type is thus frankly explained: 'Gutch's family is a very fine one, consisting of well-grown sons and daughters, and all likely and well favoured,—what is called a happy family. That is, according to my interpretation, a numerous assemblage of young men and women, all fond of each other to a certain degree, and all happy together, but where the very number forbids any two of them to get close enough to each other to share secrets and *be friends*. That close intercourse can only exist (commonly, I think) in a family of two or three. I do not envy large families. The fraternal affection by diffusion and multi-participation is ordinarily thin and weak. They don't get near enough to each other.'

The Southampton Buildings, a background of much English literary life but little noticed by the guide-books, remained the Lambs' home for a year. At the end of this time Charles, having received a real or fancied hint from Gutch that his rooms were wanted, decided to move. On Lady-Day he changed his dwelling to 16, Mitre Court. Had Lamb been less delighted with his transfer, one might be more inclined to believe in Gutch's inhospitality. Charles had previously on similar occasions manifested a sensitiveness towards neighbours that may not have been justified. 'Poor Mary's disorder . . . has made us a sort of marked people. We can nowhere be private except in the midst of London.' Well, in the Southampton Buildings he was in the midst of London, and still not sufficiently private.

In the Mitre Court Buildings, within the Temple, he had returned to the place where he was born. King Charles could hardly have been more delighted with his Restoration than Charles Lamb appeared to be with his reunion with old times. His attic domicile four flights above street-level, seemed to him, as he said, 'an excellent tip-toe prospect. I can see the white sails glide by the bottom of the King's Bench walks as I lie in my bed.' He proved his enthusiasm for this prospect by

remaining with it for a period of eight years. It was one of the most productive cycles of the Lambs' lives.

The social rise of Charles and Mary began with their return to London. Charles's home now for the first time had a mistress, that subtle element which, in Mary's case, gave warmth and grace to hospitality. Death had wiped out the disparaging social connexions of which Thomas De Quincey took such careful note in writing Lamb's biography. 'Yet, naturally, the social rank of the parents, as persons still living, must have operated disadvantageously for the children.' Their only living relative now was John Lamb, Gentleman, of the South Sea House, whom not even De Quincey could object to meeting. Charles's circle included few but university men, because Charles himself, though without the stamp and patent, was of that class. At the same time he enjoyed society for its own sake. He and his sister had been from childhood card-players and night-owls, with a natural taste for merry and convivial company. They liked to treat their guests to food and drink, puns and acrostics, conversation and repartee. Their home, if it was not Belgravia, was good Bohemia.

Mary made her way, quietly. Content to be at home at last, she found acquaintances at first among her brother's friends. 'Mary never goes anywhere', said Charles, a bit ruefully. Pitied for her condition, she soon created for herself the legend of a brave sufferer. It was not long before she had 'female' friends calling upon her. Through Coleridge she had become acquainted with Elizabeth Benger, a novelist and biographer. But for Charles's unfortunate prejudice against all 'authoresses', Mary Lamb and Elizabeth Benger might have become real friends. 'I came home t'other day from business, hungry as a hunter, to dinner . . . and whom found I closeted with Mary but . . . one Miss Benje, or Benje; I don't know how she spells her name. I just came in time enough, I believe, luckily to prevent them from exchanging vows of eternal friendship.' Charles assumed that enthusiastic friendships were not for women. Miss Benger nevertheless persevered until she drew Mary out of her twilight retirement sufficiently to present her to the bright shine of a literary tea-party. What this acquaintance with an independent and successful woman of letters must have meant to Mary can be guessed.

It was not long after this that she embarked upon her first known literary venture. A poem which she laid without warning before the critical Charles struck his attention. Voicing warm approval, he began at once to circulate it. The little ballad expressed in delicate though faulty verses a quaint and conceit-like phantasy which showed how far Mary still was from even toying with real feeling. The theme of her ballad was the thin tragedy of an artist's dream lady.

*High-born Helen!  
Round your dwelling  
These twenty years I've paced in vain;  
Haughty beauty  
Your lover's duty  
Has been to glory in his pain.*

*High-born Helen!  
Proudly telling  
Stories of your cold disdain,  
I starve, I die —  
Now you comply,  
And I no longer can complain.*

*These twenty years  
I've lived in tears,  
Dwelling forever on a frown;  
On sighs I've fed  
Your scorn my bread:  
I perish now you kind are grown*

*Can I, who loved  
My Beloved  
But for the 'scorn was in her eye'?  
Can I be moved  
For my Beloved  
When she returns me 'sigh for sigh'?*

*In stately pride  
By my bedside  
High-born Helen's portrait's hung  
Deaf to my praise;  
My mournful lays  
Are nightly to the portrait sung*

*To that I weep,  
Nor ever sleep,  
Complaining all night long to her  
Helen grown old  
No longer cold,  
Said, 'You to all men I prefer'.*

## 4

Lamb's passion of the moment glorified one George Dyer, a threadbare scholar, who lives for posterity chiefly in Lamb's exaggerated terms. Sober, absent-minded, lonely George Dyer had come to fill the vacancy left by the sentimental Lloyd. Dyer led the life of a publisher's hack in Clifford's Inn, resembling in his poverty, goodness, and learning nothing so much as a character in the *Canterbury Tales*. For Lamb he wore the matchless halo of a Christ's Hospital Grecian, one of those elected to become well-established Churchmen. But Dyer, in an unfortunate moment, had turned Unitarian. Hence his curious life on the fringe of letters and his musty, bookish existence in the barristers' hall.

The middle-aged Dyer, twenty years older than Charles Lamb, had yet another attraction for his young friend—an exceptional, total, and bracing lack of humour. His abysmal solemnity amazed and delighted his whimsical friend. Charles seemed to find unceasing entertainment in rediscovering and reconfirming for himself the fact of Dyer's unbelievable gravity. The man's parchment-like nature surprised other commentators besides Charles Lamb; but he managed to preserve among them a reputation for strength and dignity, through all the multiplication of anecdotes at his expense. One of his critics summed him up as 'God Almighty's gentleman'.

Dyer proved just the right tonic for Charles at this time. His unchanging literalness supplied an antidote to whimsical moods which Lloyd's vapours and Coleridge's sympathy had only stimulated. His worst pedantries rested on a solid substratum of erudition to which Charles bowed down in his heart. The innate integrity of the scholar appealed to the same commonplace virtue in the disciple. The friendship did much to help Charles shake off the romantic spell of his youth and send out literary feelers for the new way that led to his future.

He interpreted the sensation at first as a resolution to give up literature for ever.

When Mary re-entered the framework of her brother's life, she welcomed Dyer to a place in it. There was no social distance to separate them. Dyer, the son of a watchman in rum-soaked, sailor-haunted Wapping, had been converted into a scholar and a gentleman by a Cambridge fellowship and a taste for learning. Mary mothered the lettered waif. She nursed him through an illness in her Mitre Court apartment—an illness which she and her brother diagnosed as a case of semi-starvation, brought on by absent-mindedness as much as penury. They treated him afterwards by having him come regularly to dinner with a shilling in his pocket to pay for his entertainment. They were delighted to see how he picked up under the regimen. Mary and another woman friend conspired to surprise George Dyer on one occasion by sewing up all the holes in his armchair. They, in turn, were greatly surprised to find afterwards that in every hole they had sewed up a treasured book.

## 5

During his gadabout years, while Mary was still more or less in hiding, Lamb had met in Cambridge a second odd personality, by name Thomas Manning. What Lamb saw in Manning did not seem crystal-clear to others. He tried in vain to force his discovery on Coleridge, but Coleridge showed a definite resistance to the man. Manning probably had very little for anyone except Lamb; but for Lamb he certainly had a great deal—for Lamb and incidentally for Mary.

When Lamb first met him, Manning dwelt in Cambridge as a tutor in mathematics. To be a close friend of Lamb's, one had to have some unorthodox principles. Manning qualified as a conscientious objector to the taking of oaths and tests. It was this that held him back in his career, though a further reason might be guessed from Lamb's frank admission: 'He is lazy, and does not always put forth all his strength.' Manning proved at any rate to be original. His speciality, after mathematics, was the Chinese language—a speciality which led him farther away from Lamb than his mathematics, for Lamb was withal an accountant. Yet Lamb adored him. Their greatest common ground was their interest in art, a field where Manning



was much at home and Lamb had always found enjoyment. Their devotion to the clinking glass and the ribald joke and their complete and happy disrespect for bigwiggery and puffery of all kinds further united them. In Manning's company Lamb found a relaxing and releasing influence. His friend still had in those early days the definite marks of a humorous mind and a generous heart.

Three years after Lamb met him, Manning suddenly decided to give up mathematics and specialize exclusively in the Chinese language. This was the beginning of his separation from Lamb and the prelude to strange and far-flung adventures. He moved to Paris in order to be near a learned professor who taught Chinese. After two years of study he informed Lamb of his intention to go on to China. Lamb besought, enjoined, entreated him not to do it. As a last desperate resort he suggested: 'Talk with some minister. Why not your father?' (Manning's old father ornamented a pulpit in Norfolk.) But neither father nor friend could stay him. After his usual amount of delay he finally set sail for Canton in the spring of 1806.

This was the end of their close friendship, continued though it was by Lamb's many letters to China. But the results came out in Lamb's future life. Manning had accomplished the only productive work that he was ever to do: his stimulating effect on Lamb's character and genius.

Yet Manning in the beginning was not without spirit—the spirit of a Lawrence, a Burton, a Sir Francis Drake. For ten years he stayed in Canton, having some vague connexion there with the East India Company and disappearing from time to time in the hinterland of China. The grand triumph of his adventures came when he succeeded in entering the sanctuary of Lhasa and in interviewing the Dalai Lama. The divine being received at his hands a gift of English lavender-water. Then, finally, on his way home from China, Manning became first shipwrecked and then salvaged on the island of St. Helena. One Napoleon Bonaparte happened to be there, and Manning, who had previously known him (actually) in Paris, had a private visit with him. But out of all these riches of experience, Manning produced exactly nothing for others. His one projected work for the world, his Chinese dictionary, the materials for which he had brought home with him, was never compiled. His

long sojourn among the Chinese, those 'unconversable people', as Lamb called them, had dried up the last springs of creation in the slow-blooded Manning.

Charles's intimacy with this friend subsisted on a rather low plane. It is not likely that Mary, though a partner to their friendship, had much share in their conversations and correspondence. Charles's letters to Manning, in their unexpurgated version, are crammed with expressions which would have delighted the *hoi polloi* of an Elizabethan theatre. He allowed his Cockney background to break through in impish, leering, near-obscene metaphors. Yet all is so mixed with the learning that had become second nature to him, that the effect is a style of Shakespearian strength. His letters of the year 1800, the year in which he totally eschewed literature, are rated by critics generally as among the prime treasures of English literature. In that year the future essayist was germinating

## 6

As far as the Lambs' oft-discussed poverty is concerned, this would seem, indeed and in truth, to have been the least of their troubles. Charles's salary grew by regular stages and was paid with majestic regularity. He administered his income, as a professional accountant should, with more than ordinary prudence. The East India Company had adjusted its salaries to keep two persons, if not in positive luxury, at least in moderate comfort. Several of the clerks were married, some had children, and Charles and Mary lived on equivalent earnings. They must have had over and above this a small inheritance from their father; though this could not have helped overmuch. The best measure of their physical comfort is afforded by their own statistics of the year 1800, when they first moved back to London. In that year Charles paid £34 for rent out of a salary of £130—about the proportion that the prudent working man has always paid. One judges that they had other things proportionately adequate. They were never again to live in poverty.

There was still a lack of margin under which people like Charles Lamb have always squirmed. 'If I could but get fifty pounds a year in addition to what I have, I should live in affluence', he said, writing to Coleridge, to whom alone he told

his money troubles. He tried for a time—struggled manfully, in fact, for about four years—to acquire a margin by making occasional witty and critical contributions to the newspapers. But he learned reluctantly that what these people, like all others, paid for, was promptness and steadiness. By circumstances chiefly, but also by temperament, Charles Lamb had not this to give to literary work. Charles and his editor simply could not understand each other. The presiding genius of his newspaper afterwards recalled: ‘As for poor Charles Lamb, I never could make anything of him.’ This newspaper work cost Charles a vast deal of anguish and he relinquished it at last with a mixture of joy and regret. ‘What we both dreaded as an evil’, wrote Mary, ‘has proved a great blessing, for we have both strangely recovered our health and spirits since this has happened’ But the £50 margin still yawned, and taunted Charles

A portion of Lamb’s salary was earmarked by the company each year as holiday money. It was always the same amount—ten pounds. Owing to this quaint paternalistic custom, Charles and Mary made the acquaintance of many lovely and romantic spots in England. Changing their destination from year to year, they achieved a wide acquaintance with rural scenery and small-town life. In the autumn after they moved into Mitre Court, they paid their first visit to the seashore. The next year they visited Coleridge in the Lake District, spending three weeks in his home, apparently on the best of terms with the whole Coleridge family. The following summer they joined a pleasant holiday party to the Isle of Wight. Their companions were the family of Captain James Burney, the sailor-brother of Fanny Burney, the novelist. Here in 1803 they joked a week away, in happy indifference to the threatening nearness of Napoleon; or rather, as Captain Burney said, ‘guarding the seacoast’ from him. Again they visited Knole and Penshurst in the company of some friends from India House. Thus from year to year they continued their holiday exploration of England. One finds mention of the Lambs at Margate, at Richmond, at Hastings, at Clifton, at Cambridge, in the letters of the time. They made some of their most solid and enduring friendships on these trips and seem to have been their most normal and human selves during such holiday excursions.

In the autumn of 1806 Charles Lamb began his informal social evenings. Coleridge had something to do with starting them. He had spent ten days with Charles and Mary on his return from Malta, and no visit of Coleridge's ever took place without leaving tangible consequences. The returned wanderer, broken in health and spirits, still had within him a touch of magic for the Lambs. At his worst, Coleridge could always work miracles for Charles and Mary. And he was insatiably ambitious for Charles. In Malta he had had some experience of the social side of British colonial life. At Government House Coleridge had shone, in spite of his illness, as the bright and particular star of the levees. His experiences, recounted in confidence in the Mitre Court attic apartment, caused its four walls to expand with dramatic possibilities.

Humorously—but not too humorously—the Wednesday evenings were begun. 'On Wednesdays is my levee', Lamb wrote to Manning. 'The Captain, Martin, Phillips (not the Sheriff), Richman, and some more are constant attendants, besides stray visitors. We play at whist, eat cold meat and hot potatoes, and any gentleman that chooses smokes.' Lamb had had one adventure with a cigar, a curiosity brought home by Coleridge from the Continent. But his pipe and snuffboxes remained his steady relaxation. The beams of his ceiling became well blackened as the evenings continued. Beginning as a little affectation of Charles's, the levees developed into an institution of English letters.

Many circumstances had combined by this time to make Charles Lamb a personage. The dedication of his life to his sister had been sufficient to make him a marked figure. But he was now an author as well. He was sought out by aspiring and ambitious young dreamers hovering on the verge of a writing career. Young Thomas De Quincey presented himself in 1804 at India House, outwardly diffident, but inwardly supercilious. Lamb invited him to his chambers for a visit, which was unsatisfactory to both. Lamb was quick to scent condescension and to resent it.

Then a rising young painter called Hazlitt asked Lamb to sit for a portrait. The result was one of the most attractive of Lamb's pictures and a delightful literary friendship. Hazlitt had caught the 'great man' idea and had painted the India

House clerk in the dress of a Venetian senator. During the sittings he attached himself to Lamb with a warmth and enthusiasm that were to be one of the steady features of his otherwise tempestuous life. As far as Lamb was concerned, his attachment to Hazlitt grew into a devotion only second to his devotion to Coleridge.

William Hazlitt had previously painted portraits of the Lake poets, Coleridge, Southey, and Wordsworth, without being much affected by his close contact with the creative mind. His association with Lamb proved different. As he painted the diminutive, glorified Charles, whose literary achievements were mostly in the unborn future, his own passion for the art of language was fully awakened. He turned from painting to writing—a step which led him eventually to rank as one of the brilliant spirits of English letters. As Hazlitt sat wielding his paint brushes and studying Lamb's features, not one of the marvellous essays by which he is known had been written. All of his splendid, glowing, creative work lay in the future. Lamb was destined to exercise the deciding influence on Hazlitt's future life and his future career. Independence and sincerity on both sides forged a quick, strong bond between them.

William Hazlitt's face was as beautiful in its way as was Charles Lamb's. A high-bred English face, with a strong nose, a sensitive mouth, and a lofty brow, looked out beneath a tumbled mass of coal-black hair. He had more than that slight touch of unorthodoxy which Lamb required of his friends. Hazlitt's heterodoxy went much further than Lamb's friendship required: he championed to the death the cause of the French Revolution and Napoleon Bonaparte. He hated intensely those whom he regarded as renegades to the people's cause. He used his new talent to castigate such persons, some of them his former friends. For the length of a generation he was the most hated man in England. The Tories abused him with every means at their command and vilified him with every available instrument. The cheap insult, 'pimpley Hazlitt', fastened upon him by them, became as fixed to his reputation as if it had described him. But he pursued his rocky path, unperturbed and reasonably cheerful, until, near the end of his excoriated life, he settled down to write his long-planned life of Napoleon. A dull, conventional biography, his book still has the thrilling merit of being the permanent crown of his unswerving life.

Despite his republican principles, Hazlitt could not escape being very much of a gentleman. He had, in common with Charles Lamb, the habit of uniform courtesy towards humble people. In those early days he was still boyishly young, and delighted to roust with Lamb at Sadler's Wells, 'that lowest and most London-like of all our London amusements', as Mary Lamb called the place. Whenever he came to London, he was a familiar figure at the Lambs' board. Though he had nothing to do with starting the 'Wednesday nights', he became a regular and brilliant feature of the entertainment as well as its most sparkling post-mortem chronicler. Mary Lamb admired him exceedingly. Of his absence during a sojourn in the country, she said, 'All the glory of the night, I may say, is at an end.' Hazlitt, on his side, liked and admired Mary. He told Talfourd, Lamb's biographer, that he had met with only one thoroughly reasonable woman in his whole life, and that woman was Mary Lamb.

In the heyday of his early friendship with Lamb he manifested, unlike his friend, the prime urge of youth. He fretted himself, as befitted his age, with the question of love and marriage. He confided his longings to Lamb, a strange confidant surely, seeing that Lamb was publicly vowed, as it were, to celibacy. So the blind led the blind, with some resulting bewilderment. 'I took him to see a very pretty girl, professedly', said Lamb, 'where there were two young girls. . . . They neither laughed nor sneered nor giggled nor whispered,—but they were young girls. And he sat and frowned blacker and blacker, indignant that there should be such a thing as youth and beauty, till he tore me away before supper in perfect misery and owned he could not bear young girls. They drove him mad.' Hazlitt had chosen the worst possible chaperon for this precious business and Lamb had naturally bungled his thankless and alien task. They both went home to sup with Mary Lamb and to recover in her safe maternal presence their accustomed tranquillity.

## 8

All this while, going back as early as 1800, Lamb's circle of friends had included the colourless, substantial, reconverted Jacobin, John Stoddart. Stoddart had belonged to the Pantisocracy group, not as a fiery spirit but as a plodding translator.

He afterwards turned his coat, for the best of all possible excuses: he fell supremely in love with a woman. He accordingly went to work to win a post in the government—working only as industriously as was necessary. Lamb indulged himself in sly references to his friend's hasty legal training. But he and Stoddart remained good friends always, throughout all the latter's subsequent official promotions, elevations, and titles. In fact, Stoddart was a good fellow who never entirely forgot old comrades and stood ready to do them a good turn whenever it could be done harmlessly. He was the best type of renegade, a confirmed humdrum family man.

But Stoddart would never have figured strongly in the lives of the Lambs had it not been for his sister. Sarah Stoddart had the bold and uncompromising qualities of character that her brother lacked. No one else needs so much to be put right in history as does Sarah Stoddart. An important and influential woman, she has survived on the casual comments of a few strangers and prejudiced descendants. Others, like Anne Gilchrist, have taken some confidential letters to Mary Lamb as the total and rounded picture of her whole life. Mrs. Gilchrist has done more, with her biography of Mary Lamb, to impair Sarah Stoddart's reputation than anyone else. It is odd that Mrs. Gilchrist, so independent of Victorian opinion in her own life, should have fallen so completely into the trammels of her age in her judgement of a fellow spirit. Sarah's brains alone should have made her suspicious of the inherited portrait. Even Sir Leslie Stephen, who was never known to overpraise any woman, recognized in Sarah Stoddart the 'woman of considerable reading and vigorous understanding'.

Sarah Stoddart had the distinction of being the one truly confidential woman friend of Mary Lamb's life. She was the only one of the 'female acquaintances' who braved Charles's prejudice and established herself on terms of intimacy with his sister. Sarah had lived all her life in the country, at Winterslow near Salisbury. Her brother arranged that she should pay a visit to the Lambs in Mitre Court, to rub off some of the country rust she had been long accumulating. The house guest and the hostess formed almost at once an intimate loyal friendship. Each woman seemed to the other the end of the rainbow.

Sandy haired, red cheeked, a definite personality, Sarah arrived in Mitre Court. Though Mary was ten years older,



CHARLES LAMB (*aet* 44)

*From a sketch made by G. F. Joseph*





SARAH FRICKER COLERIDGE

Sarah also was no longer young as women's ages were counted in those days. Born in the same year as Charles Lamb, she had turned the corner of thirty when she and Mary met. This wholesome woman, with her hair cut short, with her habit of propping her feet up on the fender, with a certain boyish freedom about her, had no reservations in the warmth and cordiality with which she welcomed Mary Lamb's advances. They had much in common. They were both insatiable readers, they were both highly skilled needlewomen, and they both liked, at just the right time and place, and in just the right mixture, their glass of brandy and water.

It was this cosy tipping that so shocked the Victorian commentators. The point is that Mary Lamb and her friend still lived in the framework of the Georgian world, and their habits did not look the same in the Victorian framework of two generations later. In the decade which saw their friendship, they could sit companionably before the fire, sewing a little, reading a little, and drinking a little, without reproach. It must be admitted that they were bluestockings, but many titled ladies of their day owned to the soft imputation. The characteristic feature of their friendship was their free and untrammelled conversation—conversation which gave Mary Lamb her first glimpse of broad feminine destiny. The world held other women like herself. At last she had a woman friend who gave her what Thomas Manning and others had given to her brother. All that she was to achieve for herself independently in the way of fame and fortune she owed to Sarah Stoddart. It was Sarah's courage and spirit that gave her the impetus.

Sarah's confidences to her friend included other than literary interests. She had passed her first youth, and the career of wifehood and motherhood which she had been brought up to expect had not presented itself. She was now frankly looking for a husband. An unusually straightforward, honest character, she saw no reason why she should not discuss this simple human problem with her bosom friend. The discussion, revealed long afterwards in published letters, did further damage to a reputation already scotched by brandy. That Mrs. Gilchrist did not see through the criticism of her time and do justice to the frank and irreproachable character behind the letters is hard to understand. Mrs. Gilchrist's unsought wooing of Walt Whitman was certainly not more ladylike than Sarah's

aggressive attitude towards the other sex. The masculine critics of Sarah's attitude, including her painfully conventional grandson, William Carew Hazlitt, are easier to explain. The final result of the gossip, however, was that a first-class literary personality of the age was dismissed from attention because she defied a few social conventions.

## 9

In the summer of 1803 Sarah Stoddart's brother received an appointment as King's Advocate in Malta. In a whirlwind of excitement, all of which Mary Lamb breathlessly followed, Stoddart married his bride in Scotland, collected his sister from her home in Salisbury, and set out with both for his distant post. It was the excitement of the old Susquehanna project renewed. In the first place, Stoddart's amazing salary, 'fifteen hundred pounds or more', struck Mary dumb. In the second place, the chances, in that far off Utopia, of Sarah Stoddart's realizing her hopes of matrimony seemed to be increased. In the third place, Malta offered a possible refuge for Coleridge, slowly perishing of the chilly damps at Keswick. To Mary's great joy, Coleridge very soon followed the others south. The benevolent Stoddart had found a job for him. Mary's imagination broke all bounds and she dreamed of Charles and herself as taking wings also. 'We talk—but it is but wild and idle talk—of following him [Coleridge],’ she wrote to Sarah. 'He is to get my brother some little snug place of a thousand a year, and we are to leave all, and come and live among ye.' This was the beautiful hope of the bound boy of India House and his home-bound sister.

Mary Lamb's letters to Malta have all been preserved. They are full of woman-to-woman confidences which reflect a cordial and unpretending friendship. The greater part of Mary's letters give good advice to the younger woman, which might suggest that the latter took the more dependent role. Such, however, was positively not Sarah's character. The Malta sojourn gave occasion to a correspondence of an otherwise revealing nature. Mary's letters are the first long writings that we have from her hand. Under Sarah's inspiration, her personality and literary style were visibly developing.

Mary's farewell letter to her friend touches on many personal matters. Written on the eve of the anniversary of her

mother's death, it produced her only known reference to her victim. The thought of her friend going away, perhaps for ever, surprised for the moment the close guard she had kept on her secret. 'My dear mother,' she wrote, 'who, though you do not know it, is always in my poor head and heart'. Her main thought, however, was of and for Sarah. 'I returned home from my visit yesterday, and was much pleased to find your letter . . . though I should have rejoiced to have seen your merry face again, I believe it was better as it was [no farewell]'. She urged the voyager to forget, if she could, her complicated past with old Winterslow suitors and set out, heartwhole and fancy-free, for the Malta hope—surely as good advice as could be expected from a spinster.

The letter indirectly reveals that Stoddart had brought his newly-wed wife, the pride of a noble Scotch family, straight to the Lambs' tiny apartment for Mary Lamb's approval. Mary, who loved a romance better than anything in the world, had given them her blessing. To Sarah, now going abroad with them, she wrote. 'Make a friend of your sister-in-law You know I was not struck with her at first sight, but upon your account I have watched and marked her very attentively. . . I am convinced she is a person I could make a friend of; why should not you? . . . You will smile when I tell you I think myself the only woman in the world who could live with a brother's wife and make a real friend of her, partly from observation of the unhappy example I have . . . given you [of her mother and aunt]'. Let us hope that Isabella Moncrieff and Sarah Stoddart profited by her advice, as they probably did. But their close connexion as house-mates did not last for long

## 10

After two dull years in Malta, Sarah Stoddart returned to England. Mary Lamb wrote to her at Winterslow, whither she had gone at once. 'You, my dear Sarah, have proved yourself just as unfit to flourish in a little proud garrison town as I did shrewdly suspect you were before you went there.' Yet Winterslow, with an invalid mother and an elderly aunt, offered little improvement on the dull garrison town. In fact, Sarah's thoughtful brother had planned it otherwise. She was to spend six months of the year in London and only six months at home.

But the invalid mother claimed her, and the good daughter succumbed to her claim. Except for occasional short visits to the Lambs, she had returned to the husbandless prospect of a Wiltshire hamlet.

A brisk correspondence between the two friends relieved their separation. Sarah's short but intense sojourns in the Lambs' tiny apartment were shining oases. She entered actively and eagerly into every detail of their lives. She slept in Mary's bed, for the Lambs had no guest room in Mitre Court, as Charles had once emphatically informed Manning. She did secretarial work for Charles, who was working on a farce, and she exchanged housekeeping ideas and other feminine lore with Mary. But she put other things also into Mary's head. 'It is about an hour after the time of leaving you, our poor Phoenix, in the Salisbury stage . . .' Mary wrote her. 'Writing plays, novels, poems and all manner of such like vapouring and vapourish schemes are floating in my head.' Sarah, who had come to fill a place in Mary's life like that occupied in Lamb's by Hazlitt and Coleridge, seems to have filled it pretty well. She also did a quantity of writing for herself, though of what nature history does not reveal. 'Really, Miss Stoddart (women are great gulfs of stationery),' wrote Lamb, 'who is going home to Salisbury and has been with us some weeks, has drained us to the very last pen.' If Sarah used the pens only for doing secretarial work for Charles, his complaint sounds ungrateful. But whatever else she used his pens for is all lost now. Sarah preserved only Mary Lamb's letters—nothing of her own.

Though the Lambs had been on intimate terms with William Hazlitt and Sarah Stoddart for several years, their two great friends had never met. Sarah's and Hazlitt's visits in Mitre Court had never happened to coincide. It makes the Lambs seem very self-centred when one notes that these two persons had never been brought together. Incidentally, it shows how little of personal gossip there was in all their voluminous letters. In the midsummer of 1806 William Hazlitt was casually mentioned for the first time in a letter to Sarah. But Hazlitt lived in London most of the time, and he now began to appear more frequently in Mary's letters to the country. 'Charles and Hazlitt are going to Sadler's Wells, and I am amusing myself in their absence with reading a manuscript of Hazlitt's; but I

have laid it down to write you a few lines.' Thus in her way did Mary suggest to her sympathetic friend that Hazlitt was an interesting and closely related person.

The following midsummer Mary succumbed to one of her attacks and disappeared for eight weeks. Moody and abstracted in her absence, Charles spent most of his time in the British Museum, working on his *Specimens of English Dramatic Poets*. All social life had stopped with him, as usual, when Mary was withdrawn. It was during this interval that Hazlitt and Sarah met each other. Sarah's brother was accustomed to return to London with his family every summer, and it is probable she had come to stay with the Stoddarts while Hazlitt was in London. Their first meeting must have taken place while both were looking for the absent Lambs; but the Lambs had nothing to do with it. Both were all set for love and marriage. In an accidentally clandestine moment they met, their courtship flourished, and in a few days they became secretly engaged. This happened in the month of August. The Lambs, engrossed in their own serious troubles, did not learn of it until October.

## 11

It was at about this time that Hazlitt wrote to Sarah the only letter that has survived from their courtship. His missive has escaped the attention of the collectors of love-letters for obvious reasons. It is a document that could be expanded into a novel, but only by a novelist with George Meredith's gift for the ambiguous. Simple romance was not for Hazlitt and Sarah. As sophisticated intellectuals, steeped to the bone in literature, they could not make love like Daphnis and Chloe. Hazlitt's letter shows this in a wealth of well-turned phrases. It is pure Hazlitt.

My dear love [wrote Hazlitt]. About a week has passed and I have received no letter—not one of those letters 'in which I live or have no life at all' What is become of you? Are you married, hearing that I was dead (for so it has been reported)? or are you gone into a nunnery? or are you fallen in love with some of the amorous heroes of Boccaccio? Which of them is it? Is it Chynon, who was transformed from a clown into a lover, and learned to spell by the force of beauty? or with Lorenzo the lover of Isabella, whom her three brethren hated (as your brother does me), who was a merchant's

clerk? or with Federigo Alberigi, an honest gentleman who ran through his fortune, and won his mistress by cooking a fair falcon for her dinner, though it was the only means he had left of getting a dinner for himself? This last is the man; and I am the more persuaded of it because I think I won your liking myself by giving you an entertainment—of sausages, when I had no money to buy them with. Nay now, never deny it! Did not I ask your consent that very night after, and did you not give it? Well, I should be confoundedly jealous of these fine gallants if I did not know that a living dog is better than a dead lion; though now I think of it, Boccaccio does not in general make much of his lovers; it is his women who are so delicious. I almost wish I had lived in those times and had been a little *more amiable*. Now if a woman had written the book it would not have had this effect upon me: the men would have been heroes and angels, and the women nothing at all. Isn't there some truth in that? Talking of departed loves, I met my old flame in the street. I did dream of her *one* night since, and only one every other night I have had the same dream I have had for these two months past. Now, if you are at all reasonable, this will satisfy you.

Thursday morning.—The book is come. When I saw it I thought that you had sent it back in a huff, tired out by my sauciness and *coldness* and delays, and were going to keep an account of dimities and sayes, or to salt pork and chronicle small beer as the dutiful wife of some fresh-looking rural swain; so that you cannot think how surprised and pleased I was to find them all done. I liked your note as well, or better than the extracts; it is just such a note as a nice rogue as you ought to write after the *provocation* you had received. I would not give a pin for a girl 'whose cheeks never tingle', nor for myself if I could not make them tingle sometimes. Now though I am always writing to you about 'lips and noses' and such sort of stuff, yet as I sit by my fireside (which I generally do eight or ten hours a day) I often think of you in a serious sober light. For indeed I never love you so well as when I think of sitting down with you to dinner on a boiled scrag of mutton and hot potatoes. You please my fancy more than when I think of you in —; no, you would never forgive me if I were to finish the sentence. Now I think of it, what do you mean to be dressed in when we are married? But it does not much matter! I wish you would let your hair grow; though perhaps nothing will be better than 'the same air and look with which my heart was took'. But now to business. I mean soon to call upon your brother *in form*, namely, as soon as I get quite well, which I hope to do in about another *fortnight*; and then I hope you will come up by the coach as fast as the horses can carry you, for I long mightily to be in your ladyship's presence to vindicate my character. I think you had better sell the small house, I mean that at £4 10*d.*, and I

will borrow £100, so that we shall set off merrily in spite of all the prudence of Edinburgh. Good-bye, little dear!

## 12

Mary Lamb had seen her friend through too many such affairs to look on this business at first as serious. It became obvious to her by degrees that here was not just another flirtation. Charles, who sometimes had a clearer sense of facts than his sister, saw the situation as it really was very promptly. 'A treaty of marriage', he wrote Manning, 'is on foot between William Hazlitt and Miss Stoddart. Something about settlements only retards it. She has somewhere about £80 a year, to be £120 when her mother dies. He has no settlement except what he can claim from the parish. *Pauper est Cinna, sed amat*. The thing is therefore in abeyance. But there is love o' both sides.' Later in his letter he added. 'It is thought that Hazlitt will have children, if he marries Miss Stoddart.' The main difficulty in the situation was expressed in these remarks of Charles's: Hazlitt was literally penniless. Furthermore, John Stoddart, as Hazlitt's letter mentioned, hated him as much as did all proper Conservatives.

The engagement had been secret for some time. Then Charles and Mary Lamb shared the secret and the responsibility for keeping it. Along in February the lovers could bear the separation no longer, and Hazlitt paid a two weeks' visit at Winterslow—surreptitiously. It was then that the engagement leaked out and the wedding day was named. Mary Lamb had the painful duty of negotiating the arrangements for the wedding with Sarah's brother. Though disapproving of the union with all his heart, John Stoddart insisted that his sister should be married 'from his house', in the name of 'proper decorum'. To this, Sarah, urged thereto by Mary, consented.

There was now great excitement in the Lambs' household. Mary was to be her friend's bridesmaid, and whatever should she wear formed the great question. Sarah wished to embroider a handsome gown for Mary to don for the occasion, but Mary had other ideas. 'I never heard in the annals of weddings, (since the days of Nausicaa, and she only washed her old gowns for that purpose) that the brides furnished the apparel of their maids. Besides I can be completely clad in your work without



it; for the spotted muslin will serve both for cap and hat . . . and the gown you sprigged for me has never been made up; therefore, I can wear that. Or, if you like better, I will make up the new silk which Manning has sent me from China. . . . It is a very pretty light colour, but there is an objection . . . and that is Mrs. Hazlitt tells me that all Winterslow would be in an uproar if the bridesmaid was to be dressed in anything but white; and although it is a very light colour, I confess we cannot call it white, being a sort of dead-whitish bloom colour. Then silk, perhaps, in a morning is not so proper, though the occasion, so joyful, might justify a full dress. Determine for me in this perplexity between the sprig and the China-Manning silk '

At last, on May Day 1808, all preparations were ready. Sarah had arrived at her brother's home, and decorum was saved. Mary's new gown had been finished, presumably the China silk, because the next time she mentioned the said silk only a 'portion' of it remained. Charles was, no doubt, clad properly, as he had not yet taken to wearing black. The bride with her 'apple-cheeks', her short reddish hair, her not too tall figure clad in some stainless white fabric made up by her own skilful hands, looked almost like any bride. Hazlitt achieved the distinction of looking like almost any man in these circumstances. Dr. Stoddart and his wife, soon to be Sir John and Lady Stoddart, supplied the fashionable note of the occasion.

This oddly assorted half-dozen people completed the wedding party. It repaired to St Andrew's Church, in Holborn. Whoever had selected the church, where Mary Lamb's mother had been buried, showed a curious indifference to unhappy associations. When London was full of other churches for the purpose, why did the wedding party gravitate to a spot so definitely associated with grim tragedy? For Charles Lamb, who had functioned as chief mourner at his mother's burial, this return to the past was gruelling. Mary, who had not been present, stood the ordeal better. It may well have been the sight of Mary, standing there so pleasantly unconscious in the May noonday, clad in her handsome dead-whitish bloom silk and supported by dignified Dr. John Stoddart, that sent Charles to the final verge of hysterics. Charles remembered the ordeal for a long time. 'I was at Hazlitt's marriage', he wrote seven years later, 'and had like to have been turned out several times during the ceremony. Anything awful makes me laugh.'

Under these not exactly cheerful auspices, William Hazlitt and Sarah Stoddart took their marriage vows. However, the real Banquo at the feast was Hazlitt's poverty. This might have been dispelled at any time by the touch of his influential brother-in-law, had Hazlitt, by any chance, been the kind of man who could be bought. How much of this Sarah Stoddart realized at the time one does not know. But Sarah was very much in love, there is no doubt of that. Hazlitt was equally deeply committed. A modern commentator has said that they were two flirts. No two people were ever married who were more in love—certainly no two people of their temperamental and intellectual stamp. There was love on both sides.

They went at first to live in Hazlitt's lodgings in the Southampton Buildings, the scene of so much that had formed and was to form the background of Hazlitt's unusual life.

## CHAPTER V

### *Literary Success*

ONE of Charles Lamb's less intimate but more important friendships resulted from meeting William Godwin. They were drawn together in the crackling political dawn of the nineteenth century. Charles was very slow in warming up to the notorious Godwin. In fact, he never succeeded in really liking him, however closely circumstances allied them. The author of *Political Justice* attracted him, as he attracted other people, up to a certain point; but his essential selfishness and cold-bloodedness ultimately repelled him, as it did others. When Godwin's wife, the passionate and glowing Mary Wollstonecraft, lay dying, six months after his meeting with Lamb, Godwin sat at his writing-table meticulously chronicling step by step her passage into eternity. As much as he was attracted by Godwin's culture, the warm-blooded Lamb could never understand a man of his temperament.

When Lamb's acquaintance with Godwin began, Godwin had practically closed his career and Lamb's had not yet started. The radical leader lived in Somers Town, occupying the apartment of Mary Wollstonecraft, which his habits and principles had not allowed him to share during her lifetime. As befitted his age, then about forty-five, he was no lone lodger, but a settled family man. The two little girls whom Mary Wollstonecraft had left him, along with her books, her reputation, and whatever else belonged to her small personal estate, formed his background. The portrait of the former mistress of the place hung over the mantelpiece. Into this inherited home of Godwin's, Charles of course soon introduced his sister. It is noteworthy that Charles and Mary, who rarely failed to take an interest in the children of homes they visited, never remarked upon Godwin's little girls. The philosopher absorbed all of their attention.

What principally drew Godwin and Lamb together was their common interest in playwriting. Each of them cherished a fixed

dream that he would find in Drury Lane the answer to his economic problems and exhibitionistic needs. While neither had within him the makings of a dramatist, neither was able with all his intelligence and genius to see this. Consequently both suffered humiliating defeats at Drury Lane in pursuit of their aspiration. Each saw the other through his misfortune, and then each prodded each to further temptings of fate. Mary Lamb, developing more and more into an author, was urged by her brother similarly to try her hand. 'Charles wants me to write a play,' she wrote, 'but I am not over-anxious to set about it.' She did not set about it. Despite her occasional flights into total unreason, perhaps because of them, Mary seems to have had more self-knowledge than the two men.

While Charles and Mary Lamb had little affection for Godwin, they had less affection for the lady who became his second wife. Mary Jane Clairmont achieved a factitious fame with posterity through her marriage with Godwin and her daughter's liaison with Lord Byron. It is hard to believe, however, that both mother and daughter did not have a fair share of ordinary common sense; for, aside from their odd alliances, they behaved with fair responsibility and decorum. Charles Lamb did as much as anyone to give Mrs. Godwin a bad name with posterity. His resentment of her entrance into Godwin's life was meddling and childish. He nevertheless gives a picture of the courtship more favourable to her than most writers of the time. The others tended to describe Mrs. Godwin as the active wooer of the helpless great man. Lamb pictures the philosopher as spreading his plumage like a barnyard fowl. 'The Professor is *courting* . . .' he wrote. 'He bows when he is spoke to, and smiles without occasion, and wriggles as fantastically as Malvolio. . .' Lamb had never before seen his friend in his flirtatious moods, which had not been infrequent. Godwin had broken Mrs. Inchbald's heart, had married Mary Wollstonecraft, and was now about to acquire a second wife. The dry philosopher had had more experience in courtship than Lamb imagined.

No sooner had Mrs. Clairmont become Mrs. Godwin than she began to patch up her husband's career. She brought his newly completed life of Chaucer to Lamb for an opinion. This, when it was given, had a surprisingly modern sound. 'I may

be wrong, but I think there is one considerable error runs through it, which is a conjecturing spirit, a fondness for filling out the picture by supposing what Chaucer did and how he felt, where the materials are scanty.' Whether for this or some other reason, Godwin's *Chaucer* fell flat. Mrs. Godwin renewed her anxious search among her husband's literary resources and assets. She found that, among other things, he had acquired, from association with Mary Wollstonecraft, a certain authority on the education of the young. Parents consulted him about the training of their children; publishers consulted him about children's books. This gave the resourceful Mrs. Godwin another idea.

Late in 1805 Godwin started a little business in Hanway Street, selling children's books at first and later publishing them. Fearing the effect of his political reputation on a scheme to furnish reading for the young, he hid himself behind the name of his printer, Thomas Hodgkins. As this did not work out, Mrs. Godwin herself assumed the direction as M. J. Godwin and Company. The business moved along to 41, Skinner Street, where the five Imlay, Godwin, and Clairmont children were established in a home over the shop. It must be said that both Godwin and Mrs. Godwin toiled industriously, producing most of the books they published. Under the pseudonym of Edward Baldwin, Godwin turned out fables, mythologies, and histories for the young, while Mrs. Godwin translated stories from the French.

## 2

Charles and Mary Lamb were early enlisted as contributors. Lamb had not yet started his Wednesday levees, and the Lambs and the Godwins were seeing a great deal of each other. They met frequently to play whist together. Godwin's publishing business was launched at the peak of their intimacy. The business painfully needed authors—others besides the publishers. Charles Lamb willingly contributed a nursery rhyme, his own version of 'The King and Queen of Hearts'. Mary Lamb found herself, to her great surprise, engaged to write the *Tales from Shakespeare*. E. V. Lucas has made the deserved comment on this event. 'Mary Lamb might, but for the Godwins, have gone almost silent to the grave. Her writings,

with their sweet gravity and tender simplicity, were called forth wholly by . . . Mrs Godwin.'

The remark is wholly and literally true. The Lambs' copious letters of the time contain no hint as to who originated the plan. Someone has said that it might have been Hazlitt's. Much as Hazlitt admired Mary Lamb, he would never have suggested outright authorship to a woman. It is just possible that Sarah Stoddart, Mary's house guest at the time, might have suggested it; but it is not probable. The only person besides herself who could have pictured Mary Lamb as an author was the untrammelled and energetic Mrs. Godwin.

As early as 1783 a Frenchman, who survived only by his surname of Perrin, had had the idea of converting the plays of Shakespeare into tales for the young. His book, *Contes moraux, amusants et instructifs, à l'usage de la jeunesse tirée des Tragédies de Shakespear*, was the tangible result. Mary Wollstonecraft had probably acquired this book while she earned her living by translating French works and writing children's stories. Her successor in Godwin's household, who also translated French books, would naturally have taken an interest in the work. The Lambs, who were notoriously ignorant of French, would not alone and of themselves have known Perrin's stories. It required Mrs. Godwin's training and character to take the leap, if leap there was, of adapting the French author's idea to English purposes. So it was doubtless she who conceived the idea of the book that was to make of Mary Lamb a figure in literary history.

Up to this time Mary had written a few poems, delicate and thin, though much praised by her critical brother. But both Charles and Mary had lately come to realize the practical disadvantages of verse-making. 'We have nobody about us that cares for poetry,' wrote Charles, 'and who will rear grapes when he shall be the sole eater?' Not only was Mary disillusioned about poetry; she had also taken lately some firm resolutions about her behaviour. Having passed the age of forty—an age at which most people's minds seem to reach out suddenly towards a greater maturity—she showed a new strength of character. Her letters to Sarah Stoddart contained some plain speaking. 'What the devil is the matter with your aunt?' she wrote less sympathetically than usual about that complaining relative. She had too little faith in Charles's

writing for the theatre to depend any more upon that. 'I have no power over Charles', she told Sarah; 'he will do what he will do. But I ought to have some little influence over myself; and, therefore, I am most manfully resolving to turn over a new leaf with my mind' Thus bracing herself with good resolutions, she let herself be lured into action by the energetic Mrs. Godwin. The *Tales from Shakespeare* was born of this self-confident mood.

It is rather pleasant to think that while Charles was producing a scholarly book for critics on Shakespeare's period, Mary was employing material from the same era for the entertainment of children. This is one of the more agreeable glimpses of their mutual dependence. The *Tales from Shakespeare* was essentially Mary's work. Her fondness for narratives and novels of all kinds won her over easily to the task of transcribing them. Shakespeare had made narratives into plays; Mary Lamb made the plays into narratives, giving the new stories a charm all her own. Romantic by nature and steeped in the plentiful fiction of her day, she was not disturbed by any incredibilities of plot. But her romanticism did not interfere with her knowledge of human nature. This she had come to know through long experience of people, aided by a kind of insight which her personal trouble had given her. The complexity of human motives which the great Shakespeare injected into a situation were skilfully set forth by Mary in her simple prose.

The variety of his characters gave her no embarrassment. She quietly set each one forth, clothed in appropriately chosen phrases. Her skilful elimination of scenes, names, minor details, betokened a fine judgement. Her quiet humour and restrained moral sense found scope within the play material without detriment to the master's work. All of Mary's instincts helped her in working over plays familiar to her memory from early childhood. Though she got stuck and complained, the work went swiftly under her hand.

## 3

The original work consisted of twenty of Shakespeare's plays, published as they were completed, in little illustrated booklets. The task consisted practically in turning out a serial,

a strain which novelists of the nineteenth century later found quite an ordeal. But Mary sailed blandly past all shoals, guided by some fabulous compass that Mrs Godwin had given her. It appears that only once was she badly stuck. 'Mary is just stuck fast', Charles reported, 'in *All's Well that Ends Well*. She complains of having to set forth so many female characters in boys' clothes. She begins to think that Shakespeare must have wanted imagination.' Charles pulled her out that time and the work sped on. In one respect she balked completely. At least one supposes that this is why Charles wrote all of the tragedies contained in the series. Mary could put her pen to no tragedy. She could write only stories with a happy ending.

She stopped once to pen a picture of herself and Charles at work. 'You would like to see us', she wrote to Sarah Stoddart, 'as we often sit writing at one table . . . like Hermia and Helena in the *Midsummer Night's Dream*, or rather like an old literary Darby and Joan. I taking snuff; and he groaning all the while . . .'

Finally, after several months, during which Mary ached and moaned at the publisher's slowness, the entire series came out in two volumes. It was entitled *Tales from Shakespeare, Designed for Young Persons. By Charles Lamb. London, M J Godwin, 1807*. Charles Lamb had written six of the stories; Mary fourteen. One must condole with Mary for the disappointment the anonymity must have caused her. No one pitied her then. Writing about it many years afterwards, E. V. Lucas proclaimed that 'Mary Lamb insisted upon it, having probably a very natural disinclination to appear in public'. From Charles Lamb's letters we learn that neither he nor his sister was consulted in the matter. 'Suffice it to say . . . we left it all to a friend, W[illiam] G[odwin], who . . . cheated me into putting a name to them which I did not mean, but do not repent. . . Enough of this egregious dupery' Godwin, who feared public opinion to the point of effacing his own name from his business, could hardly be expected to be bold where the name of Mary Lamb was concerned.

Mary was plainly without recourse. Though Charles sputtered about Godwin's secrecy on this one occasion, he did not sputter half enough at the time and never afterwards referred to it. The real point with him was not so much that Mary had a deleterious background as that she was a woman. This



was the attitude of the age—an attitude that Charles fully shared. He had a special prejudice against ‘authoresses’, and little understanding of his sister’s wish to appear in this graceless guise. So Mary’s fair hopes were shattered. Her sole comfort came from the widening circle of her acquaintance, where her share in the stories was well known. But the public fame went to Charles and helped to expand his growing literary reputation.

Another disappointment lingered in store for Mary. She had kept her eye fixed on the financial reward which her work would bring in. ‘I think I shall get fifty pounds a year at the lowest calculation,’ she had written to Sarah Stoddart, ‘but as I have not yet seen any money of my own earning, for we do not expect to be paid ’till Christmas, I do not feel the good fortune that has so unexpectedly befallen me half so much as I ought to. But another year no doubt I shall perceive it.’ Charles shared her belief that the *Tales* would be their golden fleece. ‘I think it will be popular among the little people; besides money. It is to bring in sixty guineas.’ But no record exists to show they actually realized these hopes. On the contrary, Mary was still writing to Sarah Stoddart a year later, though less trustfully, about her future riches. Considering Godwin’s well-known haziness about money matters and his ensuing failure in business, it is unlikely that Mary’s golden fleece ever came into port. The fame went to Charles and the money, most probably, helped to keep alive Godwin’s declining enterprise. Mary was left to find her satisfaction in whatever subterranean fame her work had acquired.

The success of the *Tales* was immediate and lasting. From the day of their first publication, they have never lacked readers. Within the first ten years five editions were required to meet the demand, an output that approached best-selling in those days. Since 1807 the stories have never been out of print. Their popularity has not been due solely to the art of the original. Shakespeare’s plays have continued to flourish and the *Tales* have continued to flourish alongside of them, not by any means as commentaries, but as independent works of art and imagination. Their author’s personality makes its own appeal. Mary Lamb instinctively avoided ‘the little people’ of Godwin’s assignment and chose her own audience—an audience she remembered from her brief schooldays in William Bird’s



FRANCES MARIA KELLY



WILLIAM HAZLITT

*Chalk drawing by W. Bewick [N.P.G.]*

Academy. ('Ladies, if you will not hold your peace, not all the powers in heaven can make you') In these far-off happy memories she found the inspiration for her style, the suggestion for the combined innocence and shrewdness of her appeal. Addressing her youth across a gap of twenty-five years, she reached an audience that has ever since, rhythmically and persistently, renewed itself

## 4

Mary Lamb passed from the *Tales from Shakespeare* to *Mrs. Leicester's School*. Her second literary venture represented her own personal choice. While she stitched waistcoats for Charles, bent over her mangling, or turned the roast lamb for dinner, she plotted her next work. Charles took note of her occupation with new respect. 'Those *Tales from Shakespeare* are near coming out, and Mary has begun a new work.' Having rejected Charles's suggestion of a play, she asked Sarah Stoddart for a subject, which, no doubt, brought something from that active-minded and too little occupied woman. But *Mrs. Leicester's School* seems to have been Mary Lamb's own book. As firmly as she had begun, as firmly did she continue. She pushed on steadily through a spell with bad teeth; through the household crisis produced by Coleridge's return from Malta; through the painful failure of Charles's play. Working all winter, 'forgetting that it was Christmas', she finished the book some time in the spring. Godwin postponed its publication until the following Christmas.

*Mrs. Leicester's School* also appeared anonymously. Godwin was still playing the cautious, worldly role. Those who insist that Mary Lamb wished for anonymity should read Godwin's letter about Lamb's *Ulysses* to get his practical point of view. 'You . . . say: it is children that read children's books, when they are read; but it is parents that choose them. The critical thought of the tradesman [publisher] puts itself therefore in the place of the parent, and what the parent will condemn. We live in squeamish days.' Godwin would probably have been willing to have Mary Lamb use a fictitious name; but failing that, he preferred an anonymous book.

A kind of signature, however, escaped his censorship. The initials 'M. B.' were signed to the preface. They certainly did

not stand for 'Mrs. Leicester', the only author otherwise acknowledged. Some students of the Lambs' works have supposed that the initials were borrowed from Martin Burney, the youthful protégé of Mary and her brother. It is hard to believe that Mary would have chosen this young man's name for the supposed woman teacher of the book. It seems more likely that she attached the letters of her own name as openly as she dared. To persons as familiar with acrostics as the Lambs, the last letter of a name is as germane as the first. Mary must have intended with 'M. B.' to signify the first and last letters of 'Mary Lamb'.

Like the *Tales*, *Mrs Leicester's School* met with a cordial reception. It brought Christmas cheer to many a young girl's heart. The country was celebrating a glorious Christmas. Napoleon had failed with his invasion, Nelson had defeated the French at Trafalgar, and Wellington was beginning to advance on the Continent. It was not a mere coincidence that all this corresponded with Mary Lamb's literary fertility. Public self-confidence ran high and individual lives caught the contagion. In welcoming her little book, the public warmly welcomed its own—its own simple intimate life as set forth in the girlish stories told by Mrs. Leicester's pupils. So Mary Lamb had her great year in 1807.

Coleridge, who had apparently not wakened to the significance of the *Tales from Shakespeare*, suddenly discovered that his intimate friend had written a masterpiece in *Mrs Leicester's School*. 'It at once soothes and amuses me to think,—nay, to know,—that the time will come when this little volume of my dear and well-nigh oldest friend, Mary Lamb, will be not only enjoyed but acknowledged as a rich jewel in the treasury of our permanent English literature.' The permanence he prophesied, however, did not come to pass. After a couple of decades, during which eight editions were issued, the book declined in popularity, and after 1830 it was finally forgotten. The rise of the realistic Dickens had wiped out romantic narratives more impressive than Mary's.

In *Mrs. Leicester's School* ten girls are brought together for the first time by the expedient of having them all newly arrived at the school. The newcomers relate their previous life histories to each other while their teacher acts as guide and chronicler. The material for this innocent girls' *Decameron* was drawn from

Mary's and Charles's own childhood and the form may very well have been suggested by Boccaccio's masterpiece. Hazlitt's momentary passion for the book had probably drawn Mary's attention to it. The characterization of the girls and their schoolmistress is slight but sure, and the stories are mainly autobiographical, with thin plots.

A note of gentle melancholy runs through them, reflecting the author's attitude towards her cruelly afflicted past. Their morality is not puritanical; it is gently tempered by charity and by a true perceptiveness of child character. Mild and poignant, but never bitter, memories of Mary's own childish trials lend a mellow reasonableness to all that she tells. These stories show, more than anything else, why Mary Lamb was so often referred to by persons who knew her well as '*dear Miss Lamb*'. A gentle wisdom permeates the book and vindicates Leigh Hunt's description of Mary Lamb, from quite another angle, as '*that fine brain*'.

Of the ten stories in the book, Charles Lamb wrote three. His tales came at the end, indicating that he stepped in at the last to complete Mary's scheme. Two of Charles's stories fell nicely into the vein of their predecessors; but his third, beginning: '*I was born in the East Indies*', shows a marked struggle with the limitations of the theme imposed upon him. Arabella Hardy threatened at any moment to assume the trousers of an India House clerk. Nor were her childish memories based on the Blakesware and Temple childhood that had animated the others. For once the India House clerk had intruded in Charles Lamb's literary career.

## 5

Mary had been writing hard now for a year without a holiday. But she again attacked a child's book, a book of poetry. It was called *Poetry for Children; by the author of Mrs. Leicester's School*. An interesting sidelight on these poems is that not only Charles but also John Lamb contributed. Once more the old Temple days were renewed for the three when John cast in his lot with the crime-shadowed pair. The lonely bachelor was accustomed to visit his brother and sister with more or less frequency. There had never been a real break between them; many signs point to the contrary. The mysterious suppression

of this relative by Charles and Mary rarely broke down. When the children's poems were assembled, however, John was admitted with one poem. Mary contributed her usual quota of two-thirds, and Charles wrote the rest.

*Poetry for Children* proved to be Mary Lamb's last book. Charles, who had done a child's version of *Ulysses* while helping Mary, wrote to Coleridge about this time. 'We have almost worked ourselves out of child's work, and I don't know what to do . . . and I must do something for money.' The fantasy of a margin, having lost none of its strength through long familiarity, was still stalking him. Robert Lloyd, of the friendly Birmingham family, dropped in on the Lambs one day after a long absence and found them hard at work on the poems. 'They are writing a Book of Poetry for Children together . . .' Lloyd wrote to his wife, 'and a Book of Poetry for Children being likely to sell has induced them to compose one' At first it seemed as if their hopes were justified. The first edition sold out rapidly. But the Godwins, for their own eccentric reasons, did not see fit to publish another. The poems vanished a year after their publication. This, in addition to the reason that the vein had been worked out, may well have led to Mary's abandoning the whole business of writing. Still, had it not been for Mrs. Godwin she would probably never have written anything.

The poems had the essentially childlike qualities of wonderment and innocence. In them Mary and Charles adopted a somewhat moral tone, exceptional in both of them as far as their prose was concerned. When the book was reviewed in 1877, after having been lost for almost a century, Swinburne described it as 'quaint and delightful' and deplored its many lost years. The gentleness of Mary's sermons redeems them. The verses have for their themes commonplace childish episodes like 'The First Tooth', 'Going into Breeches', 'The Broken Doll'. Charles thought 'the number of subjects, all of children, picked out by an old bachelor and an old maid', was noteworthy. 'Many parents would not have found so many', he said.

A number of the poems dwelt on the privations and hardships of the poor. Mary Lamb had adopted this theme in *Mrs. Leicester's School* and she retained it in her verses. Among her poems the following illustrates one of her variations on the theme:

## THE REAPER'S CHILD

*If you go to the field where the Reapers now bind  
The sheaves of ripe corn, there a fine little lass,  
Only three months of age, by the hedge-row you'll find,  
Left alone by its mother upon the low grass*

*While the mother is reaping, the infant is sleeping;  
Not the basket that holds the provision is less  
By the hard-working Reaper, than this little sleeper,  
Regarded, 'till hunger does on the babe press*

*Then it opens its eyes, and it utters loud cries,  
Which its hard-working mother afar off will hear,  
She comes at its calling, she quiets its squalling,  
And feeds it, and leaves it again without fear.*

*When you were as young as this field-nursed daughter,  
You were fed in the house, and brought up on the knee;  
So tenderly watched, thy fond mother thought her  
Whole time well bestowed in nursing of thee*

## 6

If a soothsayer had been consulted by the Lambs, he would surely have told them to beware of the year 1809. It was the critical year of their joint lives. After a period of peace and security everything went wrong again in that particular twelve-month. Mary was suddenly attacked by one of her most severe illnesses. That same summer, while Mary still tarried in the hospital, Charles was arrested for drunkenness. It happened on Sunday in a little village near London, whither Charles and a fellow clerk from India House had gone for an outing. An excess of holiday spirits brought them in conflict with the local church elders and Lamb was put in the stocks. 'A thing of naught'—as he afterwards dismissed it—'a fault of youth and warmer blood.' In reality Lamb was thirty-four; he could scarcely plead youth in extenuation of his conduct. He might with more justice have pleaded Destiny—the awful Destiny of the house of Lamb. This and the narrow-mindedness of . Barnet landed the celebrated Charles Lamb, on a fine Sunday morning in 1809, in the public stocks. And Mary was doing penance in a straitjacket at Hoxton at the same time. The



brother and sister had broken down simultaneously when, if ever strength and self-confidence might have been expected of them, this was the time.

They had moved out of their Mitre Court attic, the home in the air which Charles had hailed so ecstatically in 1801. A great deal of importance had taken place there. In these rooms Mary Lamb had found a friend in Sarah Stoddart; Thomas Manning had been entertained until he left for China; thither Coleridge had returned, sick and disappointed, from Malta. On the altar of this small hearth Charles had laid his critical masterpiece, *Specimens of English Dramatic Poets*, and Mary had placed her whole literary repertoire. Things on the whole had gone well in Mitre Court. Why did they move? Charles said the landlord needed the rooms. It may be that Charles had had only another of his paranoid dreams.

However, they seemed pleased at the prospect of change. Their new home, No. 4, Inner Temple Lane, represented an improvement in their standard of living. It was a commodious dwelling—almost as roomy as Salt's old chambers. Charles and Mary commanded for themselves two rooms on the third floor and five rooms above, with an inner private staircase. Charles reigned alone over the two rooms—'one for prints and one for books'. The upper floor was used by Mary for the housekeeping, and by the new maid. For the Lambs had added this further possibility of disturbance to their precariously balanced lives. On moving into Mitre Court, Charles had said, emphatically: 'I have neither maid nor laundress, not caring to be troubled with them!' He had now changed his mind. The increments to his India House salary had brought it up to £160 a year and his literary work must have paid him something. Lamb had become more widely known as an author and a personage. No longer 'Charlie', except in India House, as 'Mr. Lamb' he acknowledged an increasing public. A lively sense of his own importance and dignity finds expression in his letters of that time.

The removal carried the brother and sister back to long-buried memories. Mary, forty-four, and Charles, thirty-four, had many long-forgotten and long-forbidden emotions to face. Souvenirs of the old life lay about on every hand. 'No. 4, Inner Temple Lane', wrote Charles, 'looks out upon . . . Hare Court, with three trees and a pump in it. . . . I was born near

it, and used to drink at that pump when I was . . . six years old.' The painful renewal of the past and the first impact of the unknown future had been too much for both. After two nights of living in the new rooms Mary went out of her mind. She must have felt that even at Hoxton there would be fewer ghosts to face. After some plaintive wailing—'Alas! the household gods are slow to come in a new mansion'—Charles also forsook his reason. While Mary sought the awful retirement of Hoxton, he retired to his own kind of indifference—nirvanic drunkenness.

But both of these breakdowns were transient. Mary's attack lasted no longer than the average six weeks; and after Charles's adventure at Barnet, he went to work on Monday with no more than the usual headache. Soon afterwards they gathered themselves together for their annual holiday trip. This time they visited the Hazlitts at Winterslow, returning refreshed in the early autumn to begin again the new life. Now the wheels turned pleasantly. Fortune, in the shape of an unexpected increase in salary, smiled on them. They spent the money on increased entertaining. In the olden days their parents had been free dispensers of hospitality, and the time had now rolled around when Charles and Mary could imitate them in a grand manner.

They did it with grave concentration. For nearly a decade they devoted themselves to the cultivation of intellectual society. Their Wednesday evenings grew into literary symposia. The quality of the company rose gradually to higher and higher levels of talent and achievement. Though what they chiefly craved was companionship, they could put their hand to nothing that failed in real distinction. Nor was any of this entertaining done casually. It was the result of hard work and a delicate but firm administration.

The brilliant conversation of the evenings one may take for granted. What eludes inquiry more successfully is the evenness of atmosphere they managed to preserve in a heterogeneous company. Anybody could come and did come, but everyone acknowledged a ruling social tempo. Mary Lamb was always present, playing whist or discreetly pressing food upon the guests. But sheer intellectuality and fast-working wit were the real chaperons of the occasion, the talk which rose above the smoke screen was something to remember and record, as it was

retrospectively related by sundry guests. The memory of the evenings is still preserved as if they were of yesterday.

Had it not been for Mary, Lamb would have become the coffee-house hero of his day, after the pattern of Dryden and Swift in theirs. But Mary was not eligible for a tavern career, and Lamb could not live without her for an hour. So he was obliged to introduce a coffee-house atmosphere around his own hearth. The regimen was similarly free and easy. It eliminated all straining for effect; and if anything *was* said for effect, it had to be good. It tolerated no undue striving for first place, in conversation or in whist.

Of all the participants in Lamb's parties, Hazlitt tells us the most on this particular point 'I cannot say that the party at the Lambs' were all of one description', he writes. 'There were honorary members, lay-brothers Wit and good-fellowship was the motto inscribed over the door. When a stranger came in, it was not asked, "Has he written anything?"—we were above that pedantry; but we waited to see what he could do. If he could take a hand at piquet, he was welcome to sit down. If a person liked anything, if he took snuff heartily, it was sufficient. He would understand, by analogy, the pungency of other things besides Irish blackguard or Scotch rappee. A character was good anywhere, in a room or on paper. But we abhorred insipidity, affectation, and fine gentlemen.'

For more than a decade Charles and Mary waged this subtle campaign for position and fame, leaving the prescribed path of authorship for this by-way to distinction. Much of their posthumous reputation sprang from the rare tone of their evenings. For a whole cycle of their lives such entertaining took the place of other forms of creative effort for them.

7

Unhappily for Charles, his sojourn in the stocks gave no permanent lift to his sobriety. His evenings, which progressed from ale to gin-and-water, did not further help to reform him. In the polite language of his contemporaries, Lamb was 'fond of his glass'. His liquors, according to one appreciative guest, came from the best 'Fleet Street supplies'. Lamb was not one to remain cold sober while pressing conviviality on others. In fact, some of the less intellectual and more regular of his

guests seem to have been there primarily to keep him in countenance. Hazlitt, a confirmed water-drinker, disdained to make any mention of Lamb's drinking. But Henry Crabb Robinson, another water-drinker at Lamb's Round Table, kept a daily diary in which the host's inebriety chronologically appeared. Lamb's apologists have explained, and he himself has stated, that a very little liquor affected him strongly; as if that were the point. Whatever his limit, he often went beyond it. But drink did not excite him; rather the contrary; and his lassitude at the end helped to send the others home.

It was during this era that the habit of drinking fastened irrevocably upon him. His brilliancy at his soirées compensated for a profound substratum of disappointment and gloom. His literary aspirations seemed to have come to an untimely end. He saw his future stretching out endlessly as a clerk in India House, and himself plodding along monotonously in the tracks of his ageing brother. Mary had shown herself capable of active literary production and had still relapsed to the mindless depths of her former attacks. It was incredible. Small wonder that Charles lost faith in life, in the urge to write, and in courage to respond to his yearnings. The career of a gentleman and a wit seemed all that was left to him, and he again determined, as he had once before, to 'take what snatches of pleasure' he could between the acts of his 'distressful drama'. But to do this fully only gave an additional impetus to his intemperate ways.

## 8

One might have told Mary and her brother that they had already done enough. If Charles had done no more than produce his critical *Specimens of Dramatic Poets* and Mary her delightful *Tales*, they would have atoned sufficiently with the public for a crime in which the public was so little interested. Posterity has never wasted sympathy on poor murdered Elizabeth Lamb. But her own children were prevented by an unalterable law of nature from weighing matters with the same objectivity. The daughter, who had committed the crime, and the son who had condoned it, were doomed to go on endlessly expiating a guilt they had never accepted. Too much time and too much determined forgetting had passed for them to accept it now. That was their incurable tragedy. Whenever the

horror of the reality threatened to overwhelm them, Mary escaped into a mad sequence of dreams and Charles into a state of drunken unconsciousness. On awakening, they found the old spectre of conscience still there, but disguised as the face of bearable sins and omissions. Charles's drunkenness and Mary's insanity were still within the realm of the mentionables—things that could be talked of in their letters. But the horror of the matricide could not be borne with full consciousness.

How often must the faces surrounding Mary have taken on for her an accusing expression! Living as she did within a stone's throw of the scene, she could not but know that many people thereabouts still remembered her deed. Making so many new acquaintances, she must have sensed the constant danger of a chance mention of the unmentionable. Playing whist with Godwin, she must have often seen in his grave face the look of the hangman. Dr John Stoddart, speaking always so courteously, knew everything; and his kind ruddy face must inevitably at times have taken on the mask of vengeance. Sarah Stoddart's countenance could be trusted. So could Hazlitt's, with its sensitive averted eyes, which seldom looked at anything. But some new face, coming suddenly into the room, like that of Thomas Barnes of *The Times*, must have occasionally threatened Tophet. So must it have been with other new faces in Charles's crowded soirées. There was nothing one could do to silence a look or stifle a glance.

Mary had long since reached the point (and Charles with her) where she could bear no mention of her mother. Coleridge once told of an accident of the kind and the dire result. 'I had purposed not to speak of Mary Lamb,' he wrote, 'but I had better write it than tell it . . . Thursday . . . she met at Rickman's a Mr. Babb, an old friend and admirer of her Mother. The next day she smiled in an ominous way; on Sunday she told her brother that she was getting bad, with great agony. On Tuesday morning she laid hold of me with violent agitation and talked wildly about George Dyer. I told Charles there was not a moment to lose; and I did not lose a moment, but went for a hackney-coach and took her to the private mad-house at Hoxton.' Fortunately, old friends of his mother were not likely to turn up at Charles's literary evenings. But the strain of meeting unprobed strangers constantly told on Mary. The satisfaction of being accepted as the hostess of a salon and

of being the much respected and deferred-to 'Miss Lamb' of her growing world did not help her to gain control of her ailment. She broke down as often as formerly and every year found her regularly in retreat at Hoxton.

## 9

Ever since Coleridge's return from Malta, his relations with his wife, always bad, had been degenerating. Returning from two years' absence, he had gone not to his home but to the fireside of the Lambs. Almost his first topic of conversation, after introducing the marvellous new invention of a 'segar' from the Continent, was his craving to be separated from his wife. Touched by such misery and always active on behalf of Coleridge, Mary Lamb put pen to paper and dispatched a letter to Dorothy Wordsworth asking if this matter could be mediated through Wordsworth. The next day she repented and wrote withdrawing her request. This was too late. The Wordsworth family, however, needed no revelation as to how matters stood between the Coleridges. The situation had long been observed closely by the neighbours at Grasmere. They tried to see both sides. Dorothy Wordsworth had taken conscientious pains to state the case for Mrs. Coleridge. 'Mrs. C. has many excellent properties . . . Coleridge is as little fitted for her as she for him, and I am truly sorry for her.' But the Wordsworth clan, on the whole, especially its feminine members, found it increasingly hard to be sorry for Mrs. Coleridge. Her obstinacy absolved them from the necessity.

After some delay Coleridge returned to his home. How Greta Hall and the 'Aunt Hill' impressed him after his foreign travels can be conceived. Robert Southey's family, arrived for a visit four years before, had never gone away. Mrs. Coleridge and her children still lived with them. The widowed Mrs. Lovell had come to stay among her sisters. The Coleridge critic Stephen Potter has this to say of the poet's return: 'Now take notice . . . ! Submit yourself to be a prisoner . . . in the dwelling of Robert Southey, Esq., [future] Poet Laureate to his Majesty King George the Fourth, situated under the great mountain Skiddaw, commonly called Greta Hall, otherwise "The Aunt-Hill",—there to be surrounded by three matrons, five young blooming virgins, the Lord of the Manor, and his

darling son.' The magnificence of the prospect was only equalled by its narrow-mindedness and pedantry. To Coleridge its self-satisfied, shut-in grandeur must have seemed awful. An abortive Susquehanna-on-the-Lake, dominated by three fading Fricker beauties and the straitlaced Southey—Coleridge could not endure it

The brief reunion, and a still briefer one the following year, put a final end to his marriage. At that time, according to the Victorian legend, a separation was agreed upon. It would be more truthful to say that a *de facto* separation took place. Henceforth Coleridge wandered from spot to spot, practically homeless, often sick and desolate; but he never returned to his wife.

Mrs. Coleridge had not agreed to a separation; nor did she agree at any time afterwards. On the contrary, she asserted her proprietary rights and maintained them by every possible pretence and subterfuge for the duration of her tenure. She kept up a continuous pretext that she and her husband were separated only by financial circumstances and other difficulties beyond their control. Her play-acting is revealed in numerous letters, discovered by Stephen Potter in the British Museum and published by him with commentaries in 1934. Mr. Potter's title for the correspondence, *Minnow among Tritons*, may aptly be quoted both as an excuse for, and as the picture of, Mrs. Coleridge's part in the story.

Mrs. Coleridge is at her best in these letters when she earnestly inquires of a friend whether *The Ancient Mariner* is an admirable poem or not. Again she pleads ingenuously for help on another point: 'It is very unpleasant for me to be so often asked if Coleridge has changed his political sentiments—for I know not properly how to reply. Pray furnish me.' She had her peculiar times and seasons for showing a Christian character. When the annuity from Wedgwood, on which Mrs. Coleridge and the children had subsisted for so many years, was withdrawn arbitrarily from her husband, she bowed her head to the blow. 'I blame nobody—and these murmurs of an oppressed heart are only for the ears of an indulgent friend.'

After Coleridge left his wife, he returned to London to start a new life. How many times since the Salutation and Cat days had he returned to start a new career in London! This time his plan took the shape of lecturing. He started a series of

talks on poetry at the Royal Institution, but the series ended abruptly. Coleridge had fallen ill. Again a well-meaning friend came to the rescue. Wordsworth posted down from Grasmere and proceeded to bear him away from London in much the same spirit of moral assistance that had guided Southey many years before. It is interesting to speculate how Coleridge's life might have turned out if his adoring and worshipping soul-mates had only left him alone.

Coleridge was brought back to Grasmere, but not to Greta Hall. The next two years he spent as a guest of the Wordsworths. This represented their compromise solution of the Coleridges' marital troubles. Like most compromise solutions, it did not work. The runaway husband had been incidentally returned to the aura of the outraged wife whose injuries sent emanations across Derwent Water. His nearness also gave her the opportunity she needed to propagate the impression that all was well between them. Two more years were lost in this equivocal situation.

Then Coleridge once more, and finally, returned to London. His departure brought out the smouldering quarrel between the two poets, the epochal break between Coleridge and Wordsworth of literary history. Wordsworth let slip the word 'nuisance' in connexion with Coleridge's habits, and the word was repeated to Coleridge by a guest of the Wordsworths. Painful though it was, the tiff seems scarcely to have justified the lifelong estrangement that followed. A more profound difference lay underneath, a long-existing strain between two opposed philosophies of life. Wordsworth could not endure the idea that his *alter ego* belonged to a world which had grown foreign to him—the free, complex, adventurous environment of London. It was the negation of Wordsworth's whole solution of the problems of a poet's life. And Coleridge had found that he yearned for the flesh-pots of the city.

The two men had at last come to the parting of the ways; a great love and a grand illusion had come to an end. The day when Coleridge stepped into the passing carriage of a friend bound for London, the tie between himself and Wordsworth was sundered. The rest was incidental. Coleridge was at last going out into the world to which he belonged, had always belonged, and would henceforth, for better or worse, adhere.



Coleridge went straight to his friends, the Lambs. They had no realization of the complexity of his troubles. Like everyone else, they thought that his whole problem was opium, which, in fact, by this time had almost come to be the case. Mary happened to be at home alone on his arrival. And just as she had once exposed herself and her insanity to Coleridge, Coleridge now exposed himself to her in his utter abandonment of grief. Disintegrating into a weeping child, he said: 'Wordsworth, Wordsworth has given me up.' Mary comfortably reassured him, telling him not to be too serious and to look on the crisis as perhaps not so 'mighty'. But the human being before her was more broken than she knew—broken by the weight of the realization of his many and long-continued mistakes and his small chance at this late date of ever retrieving them. But Mary and her brother were not moralists: Charles was a humorist and Mary a homespun philosopher. In their society and within a remarkably short space of time, signs of gradual upbuilding within Coleridge began. 'Coleridge has powdered his head, and looks like Bacchus, Bacchus ever sleek and young', wrote Lamb innocently to Wordsworth.

The old friendship of the trio swung again into the familiar orbit. Coleridge appeared at Lamb's Wednesday evenings. At first, according to the diarist Robinson, he was 'in bad form; very windy'. But by the next year he had recovered his old eloquence. He launched forth in a course of lectures on Shakespeare and carried them through to a successful finish. The Lambs attended his course, as they had not done when he had spoken formerly on poetry. At one lecture, on 'The Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*', he gave an unusually rambling talk. Lamb, sitting beside Robinson, whispered behind his hand: 'This is not so much amiss. . . . He is delivering the lecture in the character of the Nurse.' Coleridge's humble subject and Lamb's whimsical comment sprang from an earthy streak in both which made them both so different from the portentous Southey and Wordsworth. When Lamb and Coleridge went out together, they managed to stagger people by their brilliancy, and in this they were not above a little self-conscious team work.

Then came an episode which threw the Lambs and Coleridge into a panic, although it concerned someone who stood well

outside their present lives. George Burnet, a former partner of Coleridge's in his Utopian scheme and a sometime friend of Charles's and Mary's, had died in the workhouse as an opium addict. Coleridge was in the apartment of the Lambs when the news came. It is a curious fact that they could not maintain themselves in the face of this blow. Robinson's dry comment: 'There certainly was every reason for sympathy, founded on similarity of pursuits and in a like want of fortune, and dependence on literary talents for support', supplies the only explanation. Mary Lamb was totally overwhelmed and had to be removed to her asylum. Coleridge fell very ill. Only Charles managed to go on without a complete break. For their guilt-burdened souls, Burnet's death stood out like handwriting on the wall.

## 11

But Coleridge's struggle against opium had already taken on a new directness. Up to 1810 he had been rather inclined to let his friends do the worrying about this 'I believe if anything good is to be done for him it must be done by me', Wordsworth had written. The easy-going, non-interfering Lambs had used their influence to promote the trip to Malta, hoping that the Mediterranean climate might cure the rheumatism for which Coleridge ostensibly took opium. But Malta had only made the habit worse and his long stay with the Wordsworths had further confirmed it. Not until his last breakaway to London did signs of an independent attitude in the matter begin to appear.

Most of his biographers have noted that his opium-taking began during his early residence at Keswick. One or two have noted that his enslavement to opium and his estrangement from his wife began simultaneously. It may be similarly established by the revelations of Stephen Potter that the beginning of his first real fight against opium corresponded with his final casting-off of his wife. The chronology is simple. Coleridge fled Grasmere late in 1810. In 1811 he regained a literary foothold in London. After 1812 he was a free man. Mr. Potter tells the story when he says: 'From that date he made a recovery almost unbelievable considering the depths to which he had sunk.'

Turning from the friends bent on 'doing him good', Coleridge determined to seek expert aid. He had an appreciation, unusual in his day, of the advantages and value of science. In London he sought out a medical specialist. Through the letters of Mrs. Coleridge one learns that he made an immediate contact with a well-known physician. This first attempt seems to have ended in nothing. Repeated disappointments of the same kind followed. The object-lesson of George Burnet's death, coming soon afterwards, drove him to temporary despair. His tormented spirit, baffled in its last hope of help from the doctors, struggled on with its problem alone. He wrote continuously—sermons, metaphysics, tragedies, poems—striving to overcome by driving effort his craving for the drug. But the conflict raged within him; sometimes opium, sometimes work, gained the upper hand. It was a bitter and lonely pilgrimage, unlit by love or victory, but sustained and dignified by an almost unbelievable courage. Five years passed thus in London, leaving Coleridge very much where he was on his first arrival. He is said to have absorbed in his opium periods two quarts of laudanum a week.

His charm had attracted a new bosom friend, a retired merchant, John Morgan, with whom he lived most of the time. Making excursions to lonely lodgings, he always returned uncured to the friendly protection of his friend's household. But at last a supreme crisis came, as a supreme crisis will after many endurable ones have passed. Coleridge made a changeless change. He went first to stay with the Lambs in the Inner Temple. Then he moved on restlessly to lodgings in Norfolk Street. 'Nature, who conducts every creature by instinct to its best end,' wrote Charles, 'has skilfully directed Coleridge to take up his abode at a chemist's laboratory. . . . God keep him inviolate among the traps and pitfalls.' Coleridge had decided to appeal once more to a physician. This time he chose Dr. Joseph Adams, a friend of Lamb's who sometimes played whist at his Wednesday evenings. From this circumstance one may deduce that Adams already knew the whole background of Coleridge's condition. That he still had a remedy to propose when Coleridge appeared in his surgery on the 9th of April 1816 is greatly to his credit.

Dr. Adams's plan proposed that James Gillman, of Highgate, should assume the treatment of Coleridge as a resident

patient. Mr. Gillman, a practising physician, demurred, but not for long. Coleridge, aroused to a new and passionate hopefulness, presented his case in person and quickly persuaded the astonished man to accept the responsibility. Everything happened very quickly. Charles Lamb and John Morgan, the retired merchant, both co-operated in the move

Coleridge entered the Gillman home with bag, baggage, and the proof sheets of *Christabel* on the 18th of April 1816. Morgan visited him frequently, stopping on the way at the Lambs' to report the news over a cup of tea. Yet Lamb still refused to view the step as serious. 'Coleridge is at present under the medical care of a Mr. Gillman, a Highgate apothecary,' he wrote, 'where he plays at leaving off laudanum.' In view of his attitude, it is not surprising that he found the atmosphere cool when he went to call on his friend. 'There was something in him or his apothecary which I found . . . unattractively—repulsing from any temptation to call again.' But after several months Charles did call again, and many times afterwards. Coleridge remained a permanent fixture in the Gillman home and Lamb could see him nowhere else.

## 12

Coleridge naturally cured himself, to the extent to which he ever became really cured. He continued to take opium in small doses as it was prescribed for him by his guardian. But he revived his work habits and led a highly productive life in spite of his invalid condition. He owed his comparative regeneration to an act of personal courage. The rock on which all his previous efforts had split had been a fantastic belief in the secrecy of his affliction. All the world knew of it and talked of it, but never in Coleridge's presence. That he could not endure. He had abandoned Charles Lloyd for referring to it in print, and more recently he had cut off his adored Wordsworth for mentioning it to Basil Montagu. In submitting himself to Gillman, he made, as it were, a public confession of his weakness. By his voluntary retreat to Highgate, he exposed his secret to the world.

Coleridge wrote an interesting letter to Gillman to prepare him for the event. In it he threw off his last disguise. He described the man Coleridge as he only knew him, less plain-

tively than objectively; less showily than as one striving to see himself face to face. 'And now of myself', he wrote. 'My ever-wakeful reason and the keenness of my moral feelings will secure you from all unpleasant circumstances connected with me save only one; viz., the evasion of a specific madness. You will *never* hear anything but truth from me; prior habits render it out of my power to tell an untruth, but unless carefully observed I dare not promise that I should not, with regard to this detested poison, be capable of acting one. Not sixty hours have yet passed without my having taken laudanum, though, for the last week, comparatively trifling doses. I have full belief that your anxiety need not be extended beyond the first week; and for the first week, I shall not, must not, be permitted to leave your house, unless with you; delicately or undelicately, this must be done; and both the servants, and the assistant, must receive absolute commands from you. The stimulus of conversation suspends the terror that haunts my mind; but when I am alone, the terrors I have suffered from the laudanum, the degradation, the blighted utility, almost overwhelm me. If (as I feel for the *first* time a soothing confidence that it will prove) I should leave you restored to my moral and bodily health, it is not myself only that will love and honour you; every friend I have (and thank God in spite of this wretched vice I have many and warm ones, who were friends of my youth, and have never deserted me) will thank you with reverence. I have taken no notice of your kind apologies. If I could not be comfortable in your house and with your family I should deserve to be miserable.'

Coleridge had presumably talked fully with the other doctors and he had once gone so far as to employ a strong-armed companion to restrain him from buying opium. But he had never previously, to our knowledge, thus confessed and objectified his urgent problem. After this explicit confession he was well launched on whatever treatment Gillman might choose to give him. Perhaps the surprised physician took his instructions too literally; perhaps not. Some of Coleridge's friends were disposed to criticize the strictness of his guardianship, but Coleridge himself remained loyal. He had come a long weary way to meet his simple but competent medical friend and he had learned a new set of values. Whatever the régime that he and Gillman worked out—and no one has ever known what it was

precisely—he accepted it as the staff of his remaining years. Though broken in body, Coleridge revived in mind. His genius, reclothed and refleshed, entered on a new cycle of influence. His spirit burned its mark on the young generation.

At the beginning of the summer Charles and Mary Lamb began to perceive the reality of their friend's adventure. Homesick for him, they turned for comfort to John Morgan, Coleridge's new friend, who needed comfort also. Morgan invited them to his country place for the summer. After a pleasant holiday with the Morgans, Charles returned to London—only to find the old Coleridge still strangely, unaccountably, depressingly missing.

*Companion on Parnassus*

THE time had come for another of Lamb's swift changes. Several influences had combined to precipitate him into action. Primarily he had lost the intimate society of his friend Coleridge. He still had Hazlitt's conversation, 'absolutely the best in London', but he had been accustomed to have Coleridge's very different conversation also. Coleridge's withdrawal seemed like a death in the Temple Chambers. Secondly, Lamb's material fortunes had suddenly and substantially improved. The event of the Battle of Waterloo had helped to assure the foundations of India House and the fortunes of those who worked there. 'If it [his position] holds out as long as the foundations of our empire in the East, I shall do pretty well', he commented. He blinked at a salary suddenly boosted from two hundred and forty to four hundred and eighty pounds a year. This was affluence on a scale that required expression. Most relevant of all the circumstances, however, were Charles's comparative literary idleness and Mary's close imitation of his ease. There was no outlet for their riches and energy except to live better; and this they did, shaking the dust of the old Inner Temple almost snobbishly from their feet.

Mary Lamb wrote to Dorothy Wordsworth: 'We have left the Temple. . . . Our rooms were dirty and out of repair, and the inconvenience of living in chambers became every year more irksome; and so at last we mustered up resolution enough to leave the good old place that so long had sheltered us.' It was the first complaint she had made of conditions that had satisfied her for eight years.

So overnight they exchanged the monastic, brooding quiet of Hare Court and Temple Lane for the racket and hubbub of the theatrical centre. Of this revolutionary change Mary further wrote: 'Here we are, living at a brazier's shop, No. 20, in Russell Street, Covent Garden, a place all alive with noise and bustle, Drury Lane Theatre in sight from our front and

Covent Garden from our back windows.' And Charles added in the same letter: 'We are in the individual spot I like best in all this great city: the theatres with all their noises.' It is easy to guess what had drawn them to this highly questionable location. Though the public had treated his *Mr. H.* so shabbily, Charles still clung to his dream of success in the theatre. Like two soft fluttering moths, Charles and Mary approached the candle.

The residence in Russell Street announced a more ambitious standard of living. They occupied two floors, Nos. 20 and 21, joining on the same level. The approach was a narrow winding flight of stairs. 'We have got new chairs and carpets covering all over our two sitting-rooms' The beloved and much-worn Hogarths no longer covered the walls; Charles had had them bound into a book. 'The loss . . . has been a great mortification to me', said Mary, who apparently trailed along, not always so happily, in the new life. A row of large windows opened on a busy street sometimes as rudely Hogarthian in scene as the original prints. The outward refinements of the Temple Courts had been replaced by the inner refinements of Russell Street

That Lamb rather enjoyed the impression he was making is shown by his story of Mrs. Godwin's reaction. 'She lately sent for a young gentleman of the India House, who lives opposite her . . . in Skinner Street . . . on purpose to ask all he knew about us. Her inquiries embraced every possible thing that could be known of me, how I stood in the India House, what was the amount of my salary, what it was likely to be hereafter, whether I was thought to be clever in business . . . in short, she multiplied demands upon him 'till my friend, who is neither over-modest or nervous, declared he quite shuddered.' Mrs. Godwin, of whom we have not heard for some time, had long dwelt in the outskirts of the Lambs' good pleasure. Since the failure of their financial hopes based on Godwin's publishing business, Charles and Mary had not bothered their heads much about the 'bad Baby'. They did not bother much now. Charles was far too busy with the involved responsibility of new social relations to have any time for publishers—past, present, or future.



The break with the Temple had been made easier by the long stay with the Morgans. 'From the time we left Calne [Morgan's home] Charles drooped sadly', wrote Mary. 'Company became irksome, and his anxious desire to leave off smoking and his utter inability to perform his daily resolutions against it, became quite a torment to him. So I prevailed with him to try the experiment of change of scene. . . . Miss Brent [Morgan's sister-in-law] and I . . . looked over all the little places within three miles, and fixed on one quite countrified and not two miles from Shoreditch church, and entered upon it the next day.'

The place was Dalston, near Hackney, where Mary had lived two years in dubious solitude. From 14, Kingsland Road, Charles journeyed daily by stage to East India House. During their stay Charles seems to have been fairly successful at leaving off smoking. So very pleased were they that they left Dalston that winter with many regrets. A second visit to Dalston one year later was made with similar success. Mary then conceived the idea that what Charles needed was to live entirely in the country. She had not noticed that he had spent every work-day in the city and that she alone had lived entirely at Dalston.

The Russell Street evenings continued. But in spite of the new chairs and the grand carpets covering all the floor, something of the old glory had departed. The portrayers of Lamb's evenings have generally preferred to use the Temple rooms as the background of their sketches. Perhaps they felt some loss of atmosphere in the vicinity of the theatres. Perhaps the absence of some old guests told on the company. Their places were taken by others—too many others, in fact. The eloquent Talfourd, the brilliant Leigh Hunt, the gentlemanly Barry Cornwall, the sober Crabb Robinson, were all still present; but old intimates were dropping off. Guests from the theatre—managers, critics, musicians, actors—made Lamb superficially happy. The best mind from the theatre was still William Hazlitt, who was writing at the time his brilliant essays on the stage. Mrs. Hazlitt came too during the first years in Russell Street. But only in these guests did the old heart of the Temple evenings go on beating, and in them only for a short time.

Lamb was growing disillusioned with his career as a literary

Beau Nash. Into his life had crept elements of discomfort on which he had not counted and which, with his great sensitivity for the boring aspects of people, he quickly recognized. His complaint to Mrs. Wordsworth, written in 1818, shows that he was feeling a little tired of his splendid open house. 'There are a set of amateurs of the Belles Lettres—the gay science—who come to me as a sort of rendezvous, putting questions of criticism, of British Institutions, Lalla Rookhs, etc., what Coleridge said at the lecture last night—who have the form of reading men, but for any possible use reading can be to them but to talk of, might as well have been Ante-Cadmeans born.' Then he whimsically excused himself for his lack of hospitality. 'Bad is the dead sea they bring upon me, choaking and death-doing, but worse is the deader dry sand they leave me on if they go before bed time.' But underneath Lamb meant what he said. Despite the misleading surface of his life, he had not degenerated into a literary bystander. He had still to obey, and in the near future now, the stern law within him.

## 3

When Lamb first met the actress Frances Kelly is not on the record. Before that he had seen her in plays. But he began mentioning her as an acquaintance as soon as he moved to Russell Street. Could she possibly have been one of his reasons for moving? Could his thoughts have been already fixed on her when the grand carpets were bought? She inspired one of his immortal phrases—one of those which Hazlitt described as 'tear-drops of literature'—when he penned the words: 'Fanny Kelly's divine plain face'. Few women won their way into Lamb's soirées; the most popular actress of the day was a shining exception. For that reason alone she was a *rara avis* in Charles Lamb's experience.

Miss Kelly had been on the stage since the age of seven, and she was now about twenty-seven. Lamb was forty-two. A woman of unusually sound and amiable character, she was widely liked and admired without regard to her talents. She had survived a harsh childhood, depicted in Elia's sketch 'Barbara S.' Her present pinnacle of success had not been achieved without a long hard struggle. It was natural that Charles Lamb should admire her for this. But it was her

entrancing stage presence that monopolized his dreams and set his idle pen at work in an effort to describe it:

*Your tears have passion in them, and a grace  
Of genuine freshness, which our hearts avow;  
Your smiles are winds whose ways we cannot trace,  
That vanish and return we know not how.*

His words suggest a reason why Miss Kelly, though without classic beauty, was able to command the adoration of the audience. But when she dropped into Lamb's place at midnight to relax herself after a tense evening on the stage, she radiated nothing of the actress's glamour. She became in company an agreeable, intelligent, conversable woman.

Though Lamb watched for these entrances anxiously, he kept his dreams to himself. His praise of Miss Kelly's acting in the public prints attracted no special attention; many others praised her. Her unchaperoned appearances in Russell Street occasioned no comment. Miss Kelly belonged to the actors' world and conventionality was not expected of her. If she had any suspicion of Lamb's exceptional interest in her, she gave no sign of it. She had many ardent admirers. One disappointed suitor is said to have fired a shot at her on the stage. Her relations with Lamb were not intimate, but only very friendly.

His sudden proposal of marriage must have surprised himself as much as Miss Kelly. On a rainy July morning in 1819, sitting at his desk in India House, he put his ever ready pen to paper and released his cherished dream.

Dear Miss Kelly [he wrote].

We had the pleasure (*pain* I might better call it) of seeing you last night in the new play. It was a most consummate piece of acting, but what a task for you to undergo! at a time when your heart is sore from real sorrow! it has given rise to a train of thinking, which I cannot suppress.

Would to God you were released from this way of life; that you could bring your mind to consent to take your lot with us, and throw off forever the whole burden of your profession. I neither expect or wish you to take notice of this which I am writing, in your present over-occupied and hurried state; but to think of it at your leisure. I have quite income enough, if that were all, to justify me for making such a proposal, with what I may call even a handsome provision for my survivor. What you possess of your own would naturally be

appropriated to those for whose sakes chiefly you have made so many hard sacrifices.

I am not so foolish as not to know that I am a most unworthy match for such a one as you, but you have for years been a principal object in my mind. In many a sweet assumed character I have learned to love you, but simply as F. M. Kelly I love you better than them all. Can you quit all these shadows of existence, and come to be a reality to us? Can you leave off harassing yourself to please a thankless multitude, who know nothing of you, and begin, at last, to live to yourself and your friends?

As plainly and frankly as I have seen you give or refuse assent some feigned scene, so frankly do me the justice to answer me. It is impossible I should feel injured or aggrieved by your telling me at once that the proposal does not suit you. It is impossible that I should ever think of molesting you with idle importunity and persecution after your mind was once firmly spoken, but happier, far happier, could I have leave to hope a time might come when our friends might be your friends; our interest yours; our book-knowledge, if in that inconsiderable particular we have any little advantage, might impart something to you, which you would everyday have it in your power ten thousandfold to repay by the added cheerfulness and joy which you could not fail to bring as a dowry into whatever family should have the honour and happiness of receiving *you*, the most welcome accession that could be made to it — In haste, but with entire respect and deepest affection, I subscribe myself,

C. Lamb

This letter was sent around by messenger to Miss Kelly's home in Henrietta Street. It received an instantaneous reply. Charles Lamb opened it and read:

Dear Mr. Lamb —

An early and deeply-rooted attachment has fixed my heart on one from whom no worldly prospect can well induce me to withdraw it. But while I thus *frankly* and decidedly decline your proposal, believe me, I am not insensible to the high honour which the preference of such a mind as yours confers upon me — Let me, however, hope that all thought upon this subject will end with this letter, and that you will henceforth encourage no other sentiment towards me than esteem in my private character and a continuance of that approbation of my humble talents which you have already expressed so much and so often to my advantage and gratification. Believe me I feel proud to acknowledge myself, your obliged friend,

F. M. Kelly

Lamb did not let the matter rest with this but sent the messenger back at once with his reply:

Dear Miss Kelly,

*Your injunctions shall be obeyed to a tittle* I feel myself in a lack-a-daisical no-how-ish kind of humour I believe it is the rain, or something I had thought to have written seriously, but I fancy I succeed best in epistles of mere fun; puns and *that* nonsense. You will be good friends with us, will you not? Let what has passed 'break no bones' between us You will not refuse us them next time we send for them?

Yours very truly,

C. L.

Do you observe the delicacy of not signing my full name?—N B Do not paste that last letter of mine into your book.

Miss Kelly did better than this. To reassure her dismissed lover, she returned his letter to him, perhaps not so promptly as she had returned her refusal, but at some favourable time. Contrary to his custom, Lamb kept this letter in his private archives, until by a long, devious pathway it finally reached the public at an innocuous date. It is now, indeed, pasted in a book, but in a book at the Huntington Library in California, where it remains an eloquent testimonial of one of Lamb's brave acts.

Fanny Kelly continued to be a loyal friend, keeping up her contacts with the Lambs through all the subsequent changes that fate and fortune brought. Much discussion has taken place about her real reason for refusing Lamb's offer of marriage It has been assumed that the reason she gave was not accurate. In fact, she herself told a biographer of Lamb long years afterwards something quite different—that her real reason was the 'constitutional malady' in his family.

Lamb assumed in his proposal that the popular Fanny Kelly would think nothing of leaving the stage to become his wife. 'Would to God you were released from this way of life. . . . Can you quit all these shadows of existence, and come and be a reality to us? Can you leave off harassing yourself to please a thankless multitude . . . ?' he wrote. A glance at Miss Kelly's past, current, and future life is enough to reveal the absurdity of Lamb's questions. She remained on the stage as long as her age permitted her; and then, following upon a bold venture as a theatrical producer, she founded a school for the training of young actresses. The modest fortune she had accumulated

as an actress was entirely spent in these pioneering attempts to influence and improve the stage. This was the career woman whom Charles Lamb so chivalrously wished to rescue from her profession. Is it surprising that her refusal, tactful though it was, arrived so punctually?

Though Lamb was brave enough to tell Fanny Kelly that he loved her, the rest of his letter is a curious denial. The inclusion of his sister in his proposal, not once by name but throughout by implication, acknowledged the priority of her claim. He wrote as one already pre-empted. A lady expects to be wooed in the first person singular. There was an unconscious confession in his constant use of 'we' that chilled romance. This impression may well have been another reason for Fanny Kelly's decided refusal. Most women of common sense and sound instincts would have declined a husband on these terms.

## 4

When Charles Lamb was forty-five, he ranked among a host of minor literary lights in England. All that he had done up to this time would have earned him small fame with posterity. His assembled *Works* had been published in 1818, chiefly through the influence of Leigh Hunt. Hunt, though never a close or warm friend of Lamb's, detected his ability early and expressed his faith in a practical way. The two small volumes of his writings reflected life as Lamb had hitherto seen it in rather pale and flickering colours. Most of the contents had been written under the influence of Coleridge, and public taste had meanwhile greatly changed. Coleridge was then enjoying the divine afterglow of his early powers, but Lamb had never possessed those same early powers. His soirées had at least served the purpose of carrying him along with the movement of the age. Editors like Leigh Hunt and John Scott saw the developing humanist in Charles Lamb and took long chances on his future. Though his *Works* had no success to boast of, the personality behind them seemed a factor to deal with.

In January 1820 appeared the first number of a new English journal. The *London Magazine* might have seemed to imply by its name that it did not aim to please the squirearchy of England. The editor, John Scott, selected his contributors for their promise and largely from among the lesser names of his

day, and, having selected them, brought them up by hand in his own way. Not all of his finds were pure gold, but Charles Lamb was a rich discovery. It required Scott's influence to set Lamb's feet upon a fresh literary path, to show him that in this field he was already an accomplished author, and to wean him away from his hopeless affair with the theatre. The slight transition from 'Lamb' to 'Elia' was all that was needed to enrich the flow of wit, anecdote, and wisdom from the same pen. Only a slight shift and enlargement of the imagined audience of one of Lamb's letters resulted in an essay of rare beauty and charm. The change was first exemplified in 'Recollections of Christ's Hospital Five and Thirty Years Ago', which appeared in the *London Magazine* for August 1820. It marked the beginning of Charles Lamb's fame as an English essayist.

It is always interesting to know how a writer is made. The process in Charles Lamb's case is unusually easy to trace. For a quarter of a century he had been writing to his friends from his accountant's desk in India House. 'I have the habit of never writing letters but at the office—'tis so much time cribbed from the Company', and 'I am out of the habit of replying to epistles elsewhere than at office', are statements that he definitely made to correspondents. He complained resentfully of the interruptions of business. 'Interruptions, if I try to write a letter even, I have dreadful. Just now . . . I was called off for ten minutes to consult dusty old books for the settlement of obsolete errors.' At another time this: 'I scrawl on because of interruptions every moment. You guess how it is in a busy office,—papers thrust into your hand when your hand is busiest, and every anti-classical disavocation.'

Evidence of Lamb's lax business habits beyond that of his letters is not lacking. The reminiscences of a fellow clerk, Mr. Ogilvie, give the same picture. Ogilvie, a young clerk in Lamb's time, was consulted long after Lamb's death for *Ehana* and contributed the item that Lamb rarely did a full day's work at India House; that he usually came late and dawdled as well. Probably other clerks in the Long Room stole time also and did not improve it. Lamb says nothing of Ogilvie's habits, but he does mention a Mr. Dodwell who would be interrupted as often as six times while perusing the newspaper. The impression remains, however, of Lamb as an

especially privileged character. On this slight accident in life hinged the development of one whom Swinburne has called the best beloved of English writers for all time. In the leisurely routine of India House Lamb learned to command the style that produced the *Essays of Elia*. The ultimate transition took place in Stoke Newington, where Lamb and his sister occupied lodgings in the spring of 1820.

Once launched with 'Recollections of Christ's Hospital', the *Essays of Elia* carried on with 'New Year's Eve', 'Mrs. Battle's Opinions on Whist', 'My Relations', 'Mackery End', 'Imperfect Sympathies', 'The Old Benchers', 'Witches', 'My First Play', 'Dream Children', 'Dissertation upon Roast Pig', 'Old China', and 'Chimney Sweepers'. The titles alone make pleasant reading, suggesting the atmosphere of Cockneyism which Charles Lamb was first to sense and transfuse into literature. Titles and stories must have been read by a small boy of ten, imprisoned in a shoe-blackening warehouse at the time, who was one day to write the supreme Cockney stories of England—a small boy called Charles Dickens. With a productiveness that was wholly new, Lamb found himself for the first time in his life playing the role of a regular contributor. His correspondence fell off sadly; that amiable art had been suddenly transformed into a stern task that had to be performed punctually. The Russell Street apartment stood lonely and forsaken during many weeks of the year while Charles and Mary lived in solitude at Dalston and Stoke Newington.

It was not to be expected that the heretical *London Magazine* would be allowed to run its course unhampered. The *Edinburgh* and *Quarterly Reviews*, representing the censorship of the day, fell upon it tooth and nail and riddled its contributors. The *London's* editor, John Scott, who had none of that fine art of long-suffering which carried William Hazlitt safely through a long, quarrelsome lifetime, took up the cudgels vigorously. Unpardonable names were called on both sides and the dispute led to a duel. John Scott was shot and killed. What Lamb thought of it all is not on record, for he wrote no letters at this time. The diarist Crabb Robinson encountered Lamb and Hazlitt talking together immediately after the episode, but learned nothing to report. It was the second time that Lamb's inner life had been shocked by a violent death (not his mother's, but someone else's), and this time as formerly he rode the



storm. Elia had been created with John Scott's assistance and could now go on without him. He ran his course unfalteringly for a subsequent period of three years.

## 5

The part that Mary Lamb played in the literary flowering of her brother is not easy to define. Perhaps she did not have a very great direct influence. She had always tried to help him in the typically feminine way of soothing his complaints. Many years before this, Mary Lamb and Sarah Stoddart had together searched out some little rooms for Charles, where, for three shillings a week, he could write alone and undisturbed by visitors. The result, as described in one of Mary's letters to Sarah, was that 'he could not endure the solitariness of them, and I had no rest for the sole of my foot till I promised to believe his solemn protestations that he could and would write as well at home as there'.

Five years later Mary had tried another experiment. While living in the Inner Temple, she had accidentally discovered some totally unused rooms adjoining their own and accessible through a hitherto unnoticed door. Here, as no one seemed to mind, Mary ensconced her restless brother. 'I put in an old grate, and made him a fire in the largest of these garrets, and carried in one table, and one chair, and bid him write away, and consider himself as much alone as if he were in a new lodging in the midst of Salisbury Plain.' This room Charles also promptly deserted, and it ultimately became an overrun sitting-room. Lamb hung his Hogarths and other prints about the walls for the delectation of visitors. A favourite spot with Mary, it was this room that she missed so much after their removal to Russell Street.

Nevertheless it required solitude to develop Lamb into a writer. When he found his true note, he welcomed the escape from the city to the sylvan quiet which Mary's thoughtfulness had provided for him. Mary had discovered the retreat, this time not for his writing, about which she had long felt only pessimism, but for his smoking-cure. Newer and fresher influences—the divining rod of a masculine impresario, the light of an actress's fine eyes—were also needed to start the flow of creation again in Charles. After this, Mary's instinctive

and maternal help availed to freshen the stream and keep it flowing. Charles could not write his essays without Mary's presence in the same room. We know of old her secretarial assistance. She may have had, and probably did have, a more direct part in the *Essays*, as she certainly furnished a good deal of the autobiographical material. At the least, she made the sequestered life possible, without which there would have been no wise, humane, and witty Elia. If Mary had done no more than this to pay the great debt she owed her brother, he would have been nobly repaid. Most of Charles Lamb's fame rests on the product of a few sequestered years.

## 6

John Lamb, the eldest of the little Inner Temple prodigies, was now a greying man in the late fifties. He had spent practically all his life in the South Sea House; yet the dull routine and monotony had not sufficed to quench his native spirit. The years had not passed over him without bringing adventures, some of which had left their mark on Charles and Mary. Yet so little actual information do we have about this relative that it is hard to piece out more than a sketchy outline of his life

Some of Lamb's friends cordially disliked his brother. The worst attack on him was Crabb Robinson's in his diary: 'John Lamb is so grossly rude and vulgar that I am resolved never to play [whist] with him again.' Robinson treated John Lamb rather savagely several times in his journal. Barry Cornwall said of him that he was 'generally abrupt and unprepossessing in manner'. Other members of Lamb's coterie, notably the brothers John and Leigh Hunt, appear to have been almost as friendly with John Lamb as with Charles. In general, John tended to lean towards the more radical element of the company. But it was William Hazlitt, the arch-radical, that he actually knocked down at one of his brother's parties. Hazlitt and he had disagreed on some technical point about painting. The argument led to the blow. Hazlitt is reported merely to have picked himself up with one of his matchless *bons mots*, and the incident passed without further notice.

From such random glimpses it is not easy to form an opinion of Charles and Mary Lamb's brother. But it is evident that his

picture fits into the family triptych. The best likeness that we have of him is Lamb's sketch of James Elia in 'My Relations', a sketch that was, more than usual with Lamb, drawn from life. That John Lamb willingly posed for the detached and whimsical portrait of himself can only indicate that trust and good feeling united the brothers. The adroit literary hand that created first Elia, then Bridget Elia, then James Elia, did not range far for its models. The first two were practical transcriptions from life and we may assume the same of the third. A strong family likeness—unpretentious, sincere, original—unites them.

The point stressed in James Elia is his human inconsistency. It suggests a key to the misunderstanding and misconception that have undoubtedly entered into the picture of Charles Lamb's brother. The same John Lamb who wished his sister to be confined for life in Bedlam may at the same time have exerted every possible effort to save her from this terrible fate. He may have withheld his financial aid with the one hand while with the other he made over his share of his parents' small fortune and continued to stand securely on his brother's bond. He would have talked selfishly in many circumstances while acting the opposite. Though Charles took all the personal responsibility for Mary, he must have leaned on John for many things; else he would scarcely have written in his sonnet to his brother.

*Still by rightful custom you retain  
Much of the old authoritative strain.*

John Lamb mustered a strong company of supporters from the South Sea House when Charles's play *Mr. H.* was tried out. John had been not only a subscriber but also a contributor to Leigh Hunt's first periodical; afterwards it was Leigh Hunt who helped Charles Lamb's *Works* into print. One must not take too literally the naïve complaints of Charles and Mary about their brother. At no time were the three of them really divided. They had all borne the family ordeal together and had uniformly come forth from it into comparative balance and complacency.

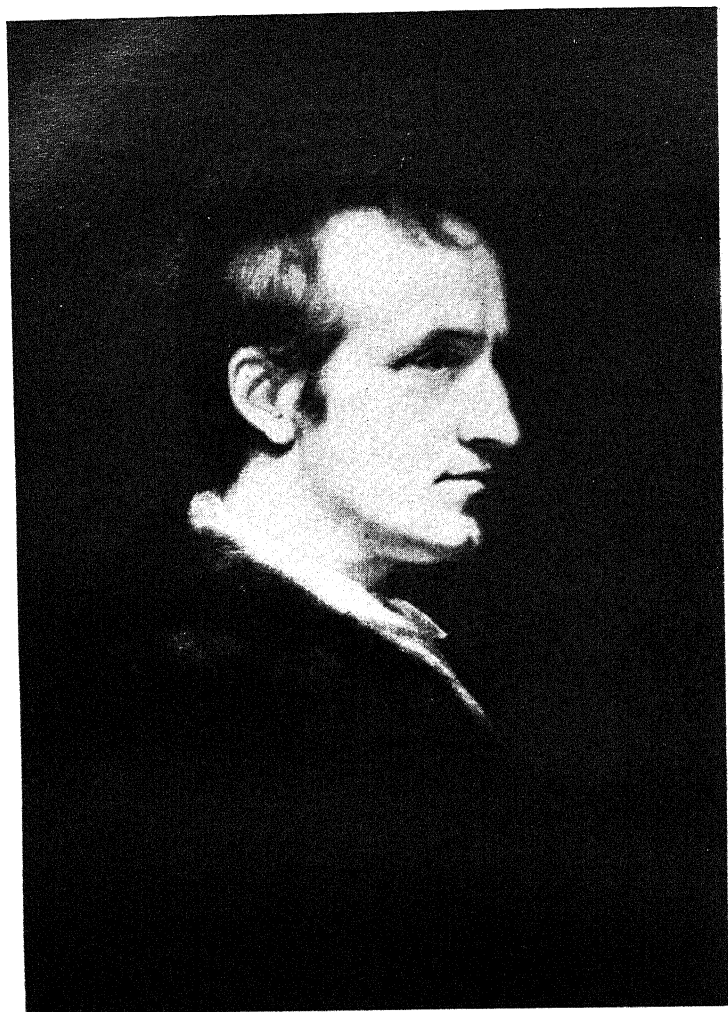
John Lamb's personality is revealed in his writings. E. V. Lucas deserves much credit for having dug these relevant documents out of the past. 'No man writes only one poem', said Mr. Lucas, apropos of John's one contribution to *Poetry*



*Mrs. Gilpin riding to Edmonton.*

*As seen after. Induced by J. H.*

MARY LAMB From a caricature by Thomas Hood, 1827



WILLIAM GODWIN

*Painting by James Northcote [N.P.G.]*

*for Children*; and with this sole clue he set out on his voyage of discovery. A pamphlet and several letters to editors were his reward. They expressed the writer's forceful views on the condition of the poor and the cruel treatment of animals. The accountant of the South Sea House rapped out in thunderous periods his denunciation of the politicians who protected social abuses. His opinion of Parliament members in general was a witticism too good for Charles to resist quoting it as proceeding from James Elia. A neater satire on the subject of the old-school-tie has not been produced. On seeing some Eton boys at play, John Lamb remarked 'What a pity to think that these fine ingenuous lads in a few years will all be changed into frivolous Members of Parliament.' One recalls that the satirist was himself a Christ's Hospital boy.

Readers who are aware of the opportunism in the origin of the Sunday-school movement in England will be interested in the following explosion from John Lamb's pen: 'The distributing of Bibles just now seems so ill-timed, for, in the forceful words of Hooker, "destitution, until it is removed, suffereth not the mind of man to admit of any other care." But after all, as a master stroke of policy, commend me to their taking up every interval of the Sabbath, ordained to be a day of rest even for our cattle, however little we regard them, in *schooling* the early care-worn, unkempt little wretches of children . . . Is it not a mockery of God for them to be made to say, "Give us this day our daily bread"? When they can read the gospel for themselves, will they not read with emphasis the woe-denouncing judgements of Jesus Christ, hanging over the heads of the canting hypocrites who are starving them?' These sentiments, proceeding as they did from a man in a semi-public position, mark John Lamb out as a somewhat reckless partisan of the rebellious classes. He signed his initials, J L, to his published letters.

There is not much to add to the saga of John Lamb, Gentleman. But it is pleasant to think that he had his trip to Paris, realizing in his late lifetime the dream of his young manhood. Napoleon fell just in time for John to visit the Englishman's paradise. In 1815 also he acquired his portrait of Milton, a painting which, after many chances and changes of fortune, to-day hangs in a dim corner of the New York Public Library. It is pleasantest of all to know that he at last found a lady who

cared enough for his odd, brusque personality to marry him. Perhaps his generally acknowledged good looks helped him in this instance.

Who the lady was and whence she came are queries that cannot be answered. Charles and Mary Lamb made no mention of their brother's marriage in their letters, though one might expect this to have been an event of much importance, especially to Mary. For most of our information about Mrs. John Lamb we are forced to depend upon the evidence from her own account, but in this important quality she seems not to have been lacking. Her actions are strongly suggestive of her character.

There still remain a few remnants of fact. John Lamb married a widow of mature years and independent means, formerly Mrs. Isaac Dowden. After his marriage to her, John Lamb made his will, leaving everything that he owned in the world, including his beloved collections of paintings, to his brother Charles, and naming Charles as his sole executor. Mrs. John Lamb made her will at the same time, bequeathing her all to her married daughter, but likewise naming Charles Lamb as her executor. Mrs. Lamb must have known her new brother-in-law for more than a short space of time to repose this amount of trust in him. In these arrangements she seems to have been slightly more than fair towards Charles and Mary, as if she had in marrying John Lamb taken on some of his responsibility towards his family. In resigning any and all claims to her husband's treasured paintings she seems even chivalrous.

From all that we know of it, John Lamb's marriage proved a successful union—one of those mature marriages that reflect credit on both parties. Goodwill often makes a workable substitute for romance in later life. Another pleasant feature of Mrs. John Lamb's is the suggestion of culture in her background. One of the foremost letter-writers of the time, Charles Lamb, considered her worthy of his best style and neatest phrases. Among her friends and acquaintances one notes S. J. Arnold, who managed the English Opera House, and Mrs. William Ayrton, wife of the music critic, both of them also warm friends of Charles Lamb. There is no reason to suppose that Mrs. Lamb's circle was very different from Charles's, or that she herself was not a person of manners, taste, and intelligence. Among the several details that denote balance in Lamb's

brother is his belated but otherwise in every way suitable and proper marriage. As the secret of John Lamb's education at Christ's Hospital was belatedly discovered, so may the mystery of his wife's identity be some day also belatedly revealed.

John Lamb died near the close of his fifty-ninth year. He did not retire from his accountant's desk and retained his robust health until near the end. Early in the same year in which he died, Charles had written of him as James Elia: 'His youth was fiery, glowing, tempestuous,—and in age he discovereth no symptom of cooling. This is what I admire in him. I hate people who meet Time half-way. I am for no compromise with that inevitable spoiler. While he lives J. E. will take his fling.' In July after this was written the 'burly Ajax of the South Sea House', as Talfourd called him, must have had some warning that all was not well with him, for in that month he made the will referred to. In October 1821 he died. His death had been expected for several days. At the approach of the calamity, Mary had taken refuge from reality in one of her periodic illnesses.

The first-born of the three little geniuses, nurtured by Samuel Salt, had run the course appointed and mapped out for him. But five-and-forty years in the South Sea House had not changed his spots. He had released his talents, expressed his nature, and rebounded to the fearful blow that fate had dealt his family. Despite his fieriness, the prayer which his father had written for his little first-born son had been reasonably well answered:

#### FROM A CHILD TO HIS GRANDMOTHER

*Dear Grandmam Pray God to bless  
Your Grandson dear with happiness;  
Pray that I may be a good Boy,  
Be Grandmam's, Dad's, and Mother's Joy,  
That as I do advance each year,  
I may be taught my God to fear,  
My little frame, from passion free,  
To man's estate, from infancy,  
From vice that leads a youth aside,  
And to have wisdom for my guide,  
That I may neither lie, nor swear,  
But in the path of virtue steer,  
My actions gen'rous, fair, and just,  
Be always true unto my trust.*



Much had happened in the year 1821 to sadden the lives of Charles and Mary Lamb. They had lost Charles's friendly adviser John Scott, of the *London Magazine*. Their brother had died. Before the New Year came around, their favourite companion of the card-table, Admiral Burney, passed away. They began to feel the need of a change to make life less sombre. Once more a little extra money had unexpectedly fallen to their lot. About a hundred pounds from the *London*, added to John Lamb's bequest, had paved the way to hitherto undreamed-of spending. After an unusually melancholy winter and spring Charles Lamb wrote: 'I sit like Philomel all day . . . with my breast against this thorn of a desk, with the only hope that some pulmonary affliction may relieve me.' The same mood in reverse led to an exciting resolution. He decided on a grand tour to Paris.

Charles and Mary were seasoned travellers in their own country. Never a holiday had passed without their adding some new part of England to their mind's eye. Cambridge and Oxford, Keswick and the Lakes, Bristol and Salisbury, Margate and the Isle of Wight, and still other English scenes had been successively envisaged. They had finally mustered courage to venture into Hertfordshire, the home of their mother's childhood; and, as Charles pictures their welcome in 'Mackery End', they had been warmly received by their surviving cousins. Mary's reunion with her kin had been especially cordial. The dark deed of her crazed moment had been forgotten in the long interim.

One historic spot, however, Lincolnshire, they had noticeably overlooked. One might have expected of them a natural wish to explore the origins of the Lamb family; to gaze upon the lonely fens which old John Lamb had so often described in his stories. But as usual they refrained from stirring up family memories in that direction. They did visit Bath, however, where the paternal parent had spent his youthful years as milady's footman. As far as the minutiae of travel were concerned—the packing and unpacking, the clambering in and out of stage-coaches, the overnighing in strange taverns, the adjustments to the time-schedules of the various coach-lines—the Lambs were veteran gadabouts.

But when it came to Paris, they could not be casual. Charles

had no knowledge of French and Mary had very little. There was also the possibility of one of Mary's attacks. So Lamb engaged a professional courier to handle the language, and a nurse from the Hoxton institution to care for Mary in an emergency. With this elaborate and expensive train they set forth to inspect the city of cities—beautiful, storied, inimitable Paris. How different all this would have been had Lamb made the trip, as he had twice before planned, in the company of his old friends John Stoddart or Thomas Manning; or had Mary seen Paris in the company of the sympathetic Sarah Stoddart! The genteel formality of the arrangements makes the whole thing seem rather lifeless. Lamb's one phrase about his courier 'He seems blind to all the distinctions of life, except to those of sex', suggests that his usefulness was limited for his employer. Sarah James, Mary's nurse, who made her début in the Lambs' life with this trip, proved a real find. She remained their close ally in later life, combining the functions of nurse and friend. But certainly no fault could be found with the expedition from the point of view of conventional sightseeing.

On the morning of the 18th of June 1822 the grand tour began. By stage-coach to Brighton, by steamboat to Dieppe, and by diligence to Paris—so the courier had planned the mighty trip. Mary Lamb got on comfortably with the cortège as far as Amiens; but at Amiens the dreaded break took place. The circumstances made her breakdown memorable—so much so that it appeared in the literary memoirs of the time. Tom Moore, for instance, mentioned in his journal that he had met at a dinner party 'Charles Lamb (the hero, at present, of the *London Magazine*) and his sister (the poor woman who went mad in a diligence on the way to Paris)'. At Amiens the procedure was exactly as if they had been travelling in England. Lodgings were found for the nurse and her incapacitated companion, and they were left at Amiens while Charles and the gallant courier proceeded on their journey.

Hence Charles Lamb's visit to Paris fell rather flat. He had waited too long and his cherished dream had faded to a mere name and symbol. Besides, he was always depressed and down-cast when separated from Mary. Though he tried to make the best of it, the adventure had lost its flavour. His notes on Paris make dull reading, hardly worth mention, except that his preferences are so characteristic. 'Frogs are the nicest little

delicate things—rabbity-flavoured', wrote the author of the 'Dissertation on Roast Pig' He met an actor, François Talma, and, knowing no French, stammered Latin to him. Miss Sarah James, who must have collected the details from others, wrote later: 'In Paris, Lamb led his own independent life—disappearing sometimes all day, having lived mostly on the river quays on the Odéon side of the Seine, rummaging the bookstalls and print-shops for old books and old prints, returning late at night to the hotel, and skating up the waxed stairs to bed, thoroughly satisfied with his day's work.' Little remains to be told of Lamb's look at Paris except that he found the French wine very good and that some of the English colony disapproved of his appreciation.

Mary Lamb's visit, on the other hand, proved a pleasing success. For it is to be noted that her upset in Amiens lost her practically nothing in terms of the coveted trip. True, Charles had returned to London when she arrived at his hotel in August. But the solicitous Crabb Robinson had meanwhile appeared in Paris and was prepared to do his usual gallant best for Mary's entertainment. Charles had also confided her to the care of an American gentleman, John Howard Payne, whose acquaintance he had made before leaving. Under their expert guidance Mary saw Paris much more thoroughly than Charles had done, not neglecting, however, the bookstalls and print-shops along the quays which her brother had recommended. She also visited the English friends whose wine Charles had tasted, and left a more fortunate impression. 'Kenny [her host]', wrote Mary Shelley of Mary Lamb's visit, 'was loud in her praise, saying he thought her a faultless creature—possessing every virtue under heaven.' At the end of a stimulating and strenuous stay Mary and Miss James packed their bags and journeyed back to London with only one minor mishap. Among Mary's things was a French tailored waistcoat which Crabb Robinson had ordered for himself and which had been left in her care. This the customs officials in Brighton relieved her of, for no explanation she was able to make could save it. The gleeful Charles Lamb let the story out.

Charles had returned, without a change of note, to his essays for the *London*. He lost himself again in the beloved English scene in which with all his senses he delighted. Mary alone had brought memories from Paris, memories of the 'dear long

dreary boulevards' and of the baffling conjugations of the French verbs. She pursued her patient study of the language and Sarah James shared her interest. Charles forgot the whole elaborate and overstaged adventure except the valuable lesson he had learned about cooking frogs. 'Pick off the hind quarters, boil them plain, with parsley and butter. The fore quarters are not so good. . . . Let them hop off by themselves'

## 8

Mary Lamb had lost a devoted and valuable friend when Sarah Stoddart became Mrs Hazlitt in 1808. It was Sarah Hazlitt's mission in life to inspire literature but not to write it. The stimulus she had supplied to Mary's pen—and that had been most effective in its time—had been transferred with her marriage. Intellectual female that she was, Sarah Hazlitt seems to have been one of those women who live for their menfolk. Cold as she seemed in the few lines about herself that she left on paper, she consistently behaved like a passionate wife and mother. The rest of her life after her marriage was absorbed in her peculiar and tortuous relations with Hazlitt. Lamb forecast the facts when he gave the pair his somewhat dubious blessing.

The Hazlitts had soon afterwards retired to Sarah's cottage at Winterslow. There they had spent several years in financial straits and other troubles. It is known that Hazlitt borrowed money from Lamb during the early years of his marriage. In desperation he gave up writing and tried painting once more, but the rewards from that proved even more slender. His wife's small income did not suffice to cover family emergencies. Mrs. Hazlitt, as Lamb had prophesied, set about having babies. Her first child survived only for a few short months and then his light flickered out. He was laid in a weedy corner of the old Winterslow graveyard. The next summer Sarah had hopes again, about which Mary Lamb presently wrote: 'I am sorry to hear of your mischance. . . . I am glad I am an old maid, for you see there is nothing but misfortunes in the marriage stage.' But good news came through at last, and Mary joyfully answered: 'I hope you are able to sit up and read my congratulations on the little live boy you have been so many years wishing for.' To this Charles added: 'My blessing and heaven's

be upon him, and make him like his father, with something of a better temper and a smoother head of hair; and then all the men and women must love him.'

At the beginning of the following year the Hazlitts came back to London. They had chosen a dwelling-place whose romantic background hardly compensated for its discomforts—the ancient home of John Milton. The spirit of the poet, who had once stepped aside to become the protagonist of divorce, seemed to haunt the dark, cavernous place. The association could seldom be forgotten for long by either Hazlitt or his guests. The Hazlitts' own apartment, a kind of studio, was comfortable enough, with lofty windows, wainscoted walls, and a deep fireplace. Here they lived in comparative ease for eight years. Then, following upon an unlucky year, Hazlitt got behind in his rent; whereupon his landlord, the wealthy philosopher Jeremy Bentham, promptly dispossessed him. Bentham's action ushered in a series of misfortunes for the Hazlitts, the first of which was their enforced return to Winterslow.

During his eight years in the Milton house with Sarah, Hazlitt established his literary style and achieved his reputation. The first year he worked as a Parliamentary reporter for the *Morning Chronicle*. Charles Lamb secured the place for him through one of his happy accidental contacts. The fiery thoroughbred bowed his neck meekly to the yoke for the price of four guineas a week. For a year the Hazlitts lived on this in comparative luxury. Crabb Robinson blandly remarked: 'I found Hazlitt in a handsome room and his supper was comfortably set out . . . On what frivolous accidents [Lamb's contact] do the most important events of our lives depend.' At the end of the year Hazlitt threw up the reporting job and launched out as a dramatic critic and essayist. Things went on with him successfully for several years, his literary style all the while gaining in verve and stamina. He had become the inimitable Hazlitt whom we now know.

## 9

Mrs. Hazlitt's place in all this has been consistently minimized by her husband's biographers. They have reproached her with being a poor housekeeper, 'without', as her grandson, W. C. Hazlitt, added, 'any of those graces and accomplishments

which reconcile men to their homes'. She has continued to receive this bad mark in most of the dictionaries and biographies of later times. As a matter of fact, the hit-or-miss housekeeping in the Hazlitt home probably suited William Hazlitt much better than it suited the critical observers. The same biographers contribute the item that Hazlitt was one of the most unhousebroken husbands that ever a wife had to contend with. He arose at two p m. and dawdled over his breakfast most of the afternoon; he did not eat again until midnight or thereabouts. His food consisted only of tea and bread and meat, and nothing could persuade him to try anything else. If the fine Victorian housekeeper of his grandson's dreams had been married to William Hazlitt, the union might not have lasted even as long as the actual one did.

Up to 1819, the year of the great crisis, the Hazlitt ménage had suited themselves if not other people. Until that year Sarah and Hazlitt had appeared together at Lamb's literary evenings. Some dissatisfaction was expressed by the illuminati with Hazlitt's little William, who, though the son of a genius, behaved like a little boy. The celebrated painter Benjamin Haydon complained that Hazlitt's infant 'put his fingers into the gravy', and the bachelor Crabb Robinson described him as a 'troubling and forward child'. But except for such minor oddities the Hazlitt family was not unduly out of line until 1819.

Mrs. Hazlitt may have blamed her husband for their exile to Winterslow. She might have been annoyed with his financial ineptitude, just as Hazlitt was annoyed with friends and editors who failed to come through with a small loan in his personal crisis. Sarah was no seraph; and Hazlitt was considerably less than an angel. But there need have been no outright quarrel to account for Hazlitt's reappearance alone in London several months later. He had to be closer to the magazines for which he worked.

He engaged a lodging at 9, Southampton Buildings, a few doors from the rooms which Charles and Mary Lamb had once tenanted in the same block. The proprietor of Hazlitt's lodgings was a Mr Walker, a first-class tailor, who left the government of the house to his wife while he carried on his business. He requires no further recommendation in his line than the fact that he made suits for Barry Cornwall and Crabb Robinson.

Mr. Walker could not but have conducted a superior business. His lodgings must have been also high class and respectable.

His wife, assisted by a daughter whose only fault was that she was much too young and pretty, looked after the wants of their transient guests. When Hazlitt rented a room, he received the usual kind, motherly attention. Miss Walker, whose name happened to be, like Mrs. Hazlitt's, Sarah, brought his late breakfast to him every day. She sometimes lingered about, dusting, arranging, and perhaps flirting a trifle, though she knew perfectly well that Mr Hazlitt was married. She little realized that what took place between them would be one day trumpeted to the world by one of the best literary styles of the century.

William Hazlitt was forty-four. He had had a hard fall from which as yet there had been no rebound. The indigestion from which he had long been an intermittent sufferer had fastened upon him permanently. He was lonely. In one of his delightful essays, 'On Living to Oneself', he maintains that he did not mind being lonely. He did. Separated (thus far by circumstances) from Mrs. Hazlitt, whom he is said not to have loved, he probably missed his home with her. He certainly missed his son, whom he adored. His relations with his most congenial friends, the Lambs, had recently become clouded. A few slight, almost peevish, differences had arisen, with the result that a rift between Lamb and Hazlitt had opened. But the real ground of their alienation lay in the fact that both had chosen the same field of endeavour, the essay; and rivalry played its part. Ambitious as they were, neither was beyond the reach of jealousy.

The Lamb fireside, Hazlitt's home-from-home for so many years, now rarely saw him. Living to himself in his Southampton lodgings, writing furiously all the while, and seeing Miss Walker so constantly, he presently found himself passionately, obsessively, desperately in love with her. Hazlitt thought himself insane; and so in a certain sense he was. But in the ordinary sense of the word Hazlitt was never insane. He had the most level head of all the crowned geniuses of his age.

Hazlitt went down to Winterslow and established himself in a small tavern near his home. He had a definite plan to suggest to his wife. Coleridge's long and fruitless struggle to obtain his release from Mrs. Coleridge had never gone to the length of asking for a divorce; he had pleaded with her only for a separation. The simple reason was that divorce was not permitted under English law. But Hazlitt knew how to circumvent this obstacle; a man on the *Morning Chronicle* who had freed himself thus completely had showed him the way. There was a legalized loop in Scottish law, known as the 'oath of calumny', by which a marriage could be dissolved. By establishing a residence in that country, an English citizen could avail himself of the Scottish privilege. Hazlitt's proposal to Mrs. Hazlitt suggested nothing less than that they should immediately set out for Scotland and obtain a divorce.

Sarah Hazlitt was not Sarah Coleridge; two women more unlike in character could hardly be found within the length and breadth of England. The word 'respectable', which represented so much that Mrs. Coleridge desired from life, had never existed in Mrs. Hazlitt's lexicon. She had her own personal and individual view of life, as well defined as her husband's.

Had there been no Sarah Walker in the case, it is difficult to guess how Mrs. Hazlitt would have reacted. But she was quite naturally and inevitably jealous. It is the literary tradition that Sarah and Hazlitt parted coldly and dispassionately. Mrs. Gilchrist's conclusion is typical: 'If they married with but little love, they seem to have parted without any hate.' What may be said of Sarah is that, unlike her husband, she maintained an appearance of sanity in an unprecedented hour of trial. She agreed to Hazlitt's proposal in what the legend has been pleased to describe as a cool, businesslike way. Nevertheless there must have been some poignant hours for her while the leaves were falling that year in Winterslow.

Early the next year, while the Lambs were preparing for their grand tour to Paris, Hazlitt and Sarah were also preparing for a journey. Hazlitt went north in January and occupied himself in Scotland with literary business of one kind and another until April; then Mrs. Hazlitt put in an appearance. A peculiar feature of the Scottish law required both parties to the divorce action to be on hand. Mr. and Mrs. Hazlitt lived



in Edinburgh very much as they had lived of late at Winterslow. Mrs. Hazlitt stayed at the Black Bull, in Catherine Street, while Hazlitt had furnished lodgings in George Street. Thus they spent the time required for residence—forty days. Hazlitt worked frantically all the time, partly because he had undertaken to pay the entire expenses of the strange excursion and partly because of the ecstatic vision of happiness before him.

Mrs. Hazlitt's state of mind seems to have been a continuous bath of cold fury, varied from time to time by sudden jets of sharp panic. 'My friends in England had rather alarmed me', she wrote in her journal, 'by asserting that if I took the oath of calumny, and swore that there was no collusion between Mr. Hazlitt and myself to procure the divorce, I should be liable to prosecution and transportation for perjury.' This was a pleasant thought to keep company with in a lonely tavern room in Edinburgh. But Sarah, being the most modern of modern women, decided to take the risk and leave the rest to her solicitor.

The legal requirement that both Mr. and Mrs. Hazlitt should be in Edinburgh meant that they sometimes saw each other. Hazlitt, at other times an exceptionally sober man, took to drinking occasionally in the public room of the Black Bull, where Sarah stayed. Mrs. Hazlitt called at her husband's rooms in George Street to collect her allowance for living expenses. They argued at such times interminably, if her journal is to be trusted. Once they met unexpectedly and Sarah wrote: 'I was rather flurried at meeting him, and totally forgot many things I wished to have said, which vexed me afterwards.' Such meetings, argumentative or otherwise, were nevertheless dangerous to the business in hand if any appearance of collusion had to be avoided. Hazlitt warned Sarah—'Said I had better not come there again; and I told him I did not intend it without a necessity, and observed to him that I had come in the dusk of the evening, and in a veil.' Thus one catches a glimpse of the real Sarah, snatching at any excuse to see her husband and stooping to the romantic use of a disguise.

The court proceedings kept them in Edinburgh for three months. By this time a subject of common worry and great moment had arisen to unite them. Young William, now approaching the age of eleven, had been left at Mr. Dawson's school in London during their absence; and the school term

had run out. Both Sarah and Hazlitt were distracted with worry. And still the court delayed. 'I told him', says Sarah's journal, 'if I could not gain information of the child, I would set off to London directly and leave the business here just as it was . . . And he said he was going to write that night to Mr. John Hunt about him; so that the poor little fellow is really feeling and thinking himself neglected.' Hazlitt was also at the end of his tether. He told Sarah he wished she 'would write to the child in the evening, as his nerves were in such an irritable state he was unable to do so'. She added in her characteristically literal way that she complied with the request.

All this seems very different from divorce as it is now ordinarily practised. With people less stubborn than William and Sarah Hazlitt, the prolonged association in Edinburgh might just possibly have led to a different outcome. Some compromise might have come to pass to change the disposition of the case. As it was, the young lady left behind in London seems to have had much time to think. But Hazlitt's passion for Sarah Walker seems only to have been increased by the long-drawn-out months. His marriage with Sarah Stoddart, entered into on the 1st of May 1808, was finally dissolved by the Scottish court on the 17th of July 1822. William and Sarah Hazlitt hastened back to London by separate boats.

Hazlitt returned to the sad anticlimax of finding his adored one affianced to another. The distracted man made scenes at the respectable tailor's house; but the Walker family took it all quietly, being the sort of settled, unimaginative people who are fortunately born every moment. Mrs. Hazlitt retired in silent dignity to her cottage at Winterslow.

When Charles and Mary Lamb returned from Paris, they found the Hazlitt marriage in ruins. The divorce was a nine days' wonder at a time when divorce was almost unknown. Hazlitt flaunted his disappointed love about the town, which caused an even greater scandal. The Lambs, usually so patient with all humankind, were, for once, shocked into hearty agreement with the Philistines. Crabb Robinson, going the rounds to find out how many people would now 'cut' Hazlitt, was pleased to report that Charles Lamb had broken with him.

*Electra and Orestes*

THE emotional tie that united Charles and Mary Lamb requires a more critical inspection than it received from their friends and contemporaries. By these it was viewed through a medium of pleased idealism. Their close relationship only challenged their friends to find a worthy comparison. 'As, amongst certain classes of birds,' De Quincey wrote, 'if you have one, you are sure of the other, so, with respect to the Lambs . . . seeing or hearing the brother, you knew the sister could not be far off.' Wordsworth's rather heavier note on their 'dual loneliness' (usually misquoted as 'dual unity') has survived as the favourite description. But no comment seems to convey the idea more fully than the simple entry in Godwin's diary after one of Mary's enforced absences. 'After dinner Fanny told me she was sure she had seen Mr. and Miss Lamb walking arm-in-arm at a distance in the street. I could not be easy 'till I had ascertained the truth of this intelligence, and I hastened to the Temple. It was so.' In support of the approving view it may be said that any love is better than none and there were many odd lovers in that romantic age. Out of theirs Charles and Mary Lamb built a happy social life that lasted most of their days and also created a rich literary bequest for posterity.

Mary Lamb was the only one to give any hint of the seamy side of the idyll. In a letter to Sarah Stoddart she wrote: 'Our love for each other has been the torment of our lives hitherto.' On at least two known occasions she tried to loosen the tie somewhat by sending Charles to write away from home. The three-shilling room she had hired for him represented her first ineffectual effort. Six years later she had tried again, and again he had broken bounds. This was her last attempt to emancipate Charles from the matronly apron-strings. All the rest of his various works, with one or two exceptions, were fabricated with Mary at his elbow. As for Mary, she wrote very little except under Charles's fostering eye.

The miseries with which they paid for this close association followed along inevitably. As Mary wrote to her 'Phoenix', as she called Sarah Stoddart: 'When I am pretty well his low spirits throw me back again; and when he begins to get a little cheerful then I do the same kind office for him . . . You would laugh or you would cry, perhaps both, to see us sit together looking at each other with long and rueful faces and saying, "How do you do?" and "How do you do?" and then we fall a-crying and say we will be better on the morrow. He says we are like tooth-ache and his friend gum-boil, which, though a kind of ease, is but an uneasy kind of ease, and comfort of rather an uncomfortable sort.' It is a credit to Mary's intelligence that immediately after this complaint she resolved to find a more cheerful way of life, for herself at least. Her efforts succeeded so well that one of their brightest cycles, the years in the Inner Temple, followed.

Thackeray it was who first called Charles Lamb 'Saint Charles'—Thackeray, whose loyalty and devotion to his wife in her years of insanity gave him the key to Lamb's nature. Lamb would have been the first to laugh off the 'Saint'. He was no saint and knew it; he could never for a second have posed as one in his innermost heart. But his chivalrous aid to his sister and his loyalty to his plighted word entitle him to as much of a halo as a mere human being can wear. No words can describe the bravery of his unflinching stand.

But Mary Lamb's unswerving devotion to her brother has passed unnoticed and unsung. What must have cost her quantities of heroic self-sacrifice has been taken for granted as natural and instinctive self-expression. Mary's unselfishness would bear much comment. She appeared, for instance, to be much happier over Charles's laurels as Elia than she had ever been over her own literary success. The year that followed the acclaim of Elia was the healthiest and happiest year in her life. To have brought Charles through at last to be a 'great man' meant more to her than to have produced her own immortal *Tales*.

Charles himself had felt free for a short time on Parnassus. But there is no living on Parnassus; one must live most of one's life in day-to-day realities. Neither Charles nor Mary, with their intensely romantic demands of life, was attuned to a simple prosaic existence. Had they escaped the guilty con-

sciences which so pitilessly drove them, they would still have been ill adapted for unaccented living. But their close acquiescence in Mary's crime had further fastened upon them a spiritual burden and their hearts had ached beneath it through the long years.

For lives thus yoked in sorrow one must turn back to the tragic myths of the Greeks. Talfourd seems to have perceived the ancient likeness when in writing of Mary Lamb he says: 'It was as if the old Greek notion of the necessity for the unconscious shedder of blood, else polluted though guiltless, to pass through a religious purification had, in her case, been happily accomplished; so that, not only was she without remorse, but without other sorrow than attends in the death of an infirm parent in good old age.' This was but a partial truth. Talfourd's personal knowledge of Mary was limited to her serene intervals. At such times she truly gave the calm impression that he conveys. But the religious purification of the Greeks had not been in her case complete.

The social alignment of the brother and sister throws a sidelight on their relationship. For the Lambs were only half-Bohemians; they acquired, with time, a different rating and moved about in a conventional pattern as well. Mr. and Miss Lamb represented a pair of often invited guests, included in formal dinner parties, musical soirées, wedding parties, vacation trips. In the first days of their reunion after their father's death, Charles had written: 'I am afraid there is something of dishonesty in any pleasures I take without *her*. She never goes anywhere.' He was soon relieved of this moral embarrassment by the consideration of his friends and by Mary's own social tact. In one respect their union simulated in the circles which surrounded them—a somewhat special society, it is true—a conventional marriage. 'Mary', remarks one biographer in reference to their single lives, 'never seems to have sighed after any other marriage.'

All this presented to the concepts of that time a matter of no importance. But to those aware of the modern theory or the power of the emotions it suggests a serious question; especially when the pair concerned are known to have suffered from mental ailments. The mutual love of the brother and sister demands of those a less naive inspection. There are far too many stories in history and literature, such as those of Hat-



MISS SARAH PONSONBY AND LADY ELEANOR BUTLER  
The Ladies of Llangollen



EMMA ISOLA MOXON

*From a wood-engraving made in 1891*

shepsut and Thutmose I in Egyptian history, of Siegmund and Sieglinde in German folklore, and of Byron and Augusta Leigh in English literary annals, to allow one to overlook the relations of the Lambs. Somerset Maugham has portrayed in one of his stories the situation of a brother and sister emotionally thrown back upon each other by the circumstances of their lives. The peculiar seclusion of Charles and Mary Lamb, beginning as lonely children in the Temple and strengthened by later events, is not unlike that of Maugham's fictitious characters on the edge of the Malayan jungle. It is not necessary to suppose that the relation between them ever took the form assumed by Maugham's fiction and the classic instances. An intense love of the kind, even though unconscious, would have played the same havoc with their mental balance and behaviour. It is necessarily to be regarded as one of the possible, even probable, sources of the painful disturbances which dogged them persistently, and overwhelmed them at times, throughout their lives.

And yet, strong as was the tie, it became loosened in the end for Charles, the less afflicted of the two, by his love for another woman

## 2

Some oddities of appearance in middle age bring Charles and Mary Lamb a little closer to us. Having worn his snuff-brown suits for many years at India House, about the time of 'Elia' Charles transferred his partiality to sober black. No inducement afterwards could make him change his colour. At the wedding of Captain Burney's daughter he appeared in his customary sable. He apologized for his sombre black with a jest about the linnet's nuptials 'at which, when all the rest came in their gayest feathers, the raven alone apologized for his cloak because "he had no other"'. He still wore knee-breeches, though the fashion of the time had changed to pantaloons, and added long gaiters in the clerical style. His lustrous black hair retained its boyish thickness, and his warm beautiful face lost none of its youthful charm. He affected a little manner of shaking hands always with two fingers—a mere nothing, and yet an important item in a picture of Charles Lamb.

Like Charles, Mary clung to the fashions of her youth. She



wore a large mob-cap indoors and a large bonnet when she went abroad, a style carried down from the days of Mrs. John Gilpin. Though a former dressmaker, she took little interest in what she wore. 'The weather is wet to weariness,' wrote Charles, 'but Mary goes puddling about a-shopping after a gown for the winter. She wants it good and cheap. Now I hold that no good things are cheap.' It is said that Charles always looked extremely neat, and that Mary looked rather less so. 'My first glimpse of the Lamb household', writes Thomas Westwood, 'is as vivid in my recollection as if it were of yesterday. . . . In Enfield, leaning idly out of the window, I saw . . . a slim middle-aged man, in quaint uncontemporary habiliments, and a rather shapeless bundle of an old lady, in a bonnet like a mob-cap.' Thus also they appeared in the London picture galleries, where they were often seen wandering together, a couple set apart, marked and observed by all others.

## 3

In the late summer of 1823, after a holiday spent at Hastings, the brother and sister undertook another migration. August witnessed their removal from Russell Street to a cottage in Islington. Why Lamb chose Islington nobody knows, unless the town's association with Oliver Goldsmith, whom he much admired, may have attracted him. Another name connected with Islington was probably unknown to Lamb. A small Jewish boy named Benjamin Disraeli had lived not many doors from the cottage of which the Lambs now took possession. Young Disraeli had moved to London shortly before their arrival. Charles would have liked this boy. He had a fondness for the Jews, as evidenced by his great admiration for Braham, the Jewish singer of his time.

Lamb's house, a whitish detached cottage at the end of Colebrooke Row, overlooked the New River. The bank sloped away from the front door to the stream. Lamb's friend George Dyer walked straight into the river on the occasion of his first visit to the place. Though Dyer was rescued from drowning, his mishap might well have suggested to Lamb that some precautions be taken. 'All my friends are open-mouthed about having paling before the river, but I cannot see that, because a lunatic chooses to walk into a river with his eyes open at

midday, I am any the more likely to be drowned in it coming home at midnight.' Lamb was a true Briton at heart; he preferred to take any risk rather than submit to a change. But his friends knew the risk for a man who could not always walk straight.

Behind his house Lamb kept a garden, with vines, pears, strawberries, carrots, and cabbages. Some of his friends declared that Charles laid about him with a right good will cultivating his Eden; others that his garden looked like a vacant lot. His daily trips by stage-coach to India House occasioned him no inconvenience; or, if so, he made no complaints of it. Some of his fellow clerks came from an equal distance on horseback, stabled their steeds near by, and kept their hounds under their desks.

About Islington, as usual, Charles was all enthusiasm. To Mary, as usual, the move brought one of her breakdowns. Her reason fled on the eve of the day of their planned exchange. While she remained in a hospital at Fulham, Charles and the maid, Becky, carted their things to Islington. When she returned, after an absence of eleven weeks, she found the newly rusticated household functioning well without her.

Mary had had her doubts all along about the wisdom of their course. But Charles could apparently find no other escape from the overpowering results of his hospitality and his increasing fame. Leigh Hunt suggests that this was the reason. 'Were friends and sittings up at night too attractive? And was there no other way to get rid of them?' The Russell Street evenings were brought to an abrupt end; they became within less than a year a mere brilliant legend. Meanwhile Charles began his life at Islington in greater solitude than he had contemplated, as Mary clung to her unusually long retreat at Fulham. When she came home at last, it was with that recrudescence of mind and vitality which was one of the miracles of her condition.

## 4

No record of the Lambs' life at this time would be complete without some portrait, however sketchy, of their maid, Becky. Boasting not so much as a surname, the humble domestic earned her page in English literary history. Among the Lambs'

biographers, Peter George Patmore first paid tribute to this minor character in Charles Lamb's circle. Trained by Mrs Hazlitt, the slack housekeeper of classic legend, Becky had nevertheless mastered her art sufficiently to conduct the Lambs' ménage for many years. She had come to them when financial reverses sent the Hazlitts back to Winterslow. She remained through three years of entertaining in Russell Street and six years afterwards in the country. Becky would most probably be described as worthy; but surely it takes something more than simple worthiness to breast the atmosphere of crisis which constantly surrounded the Lambs. Like all of their circle, Becky was a personage.

In Patmore's sketch she figures as a benevolent despot fending for the Lambs with unrelenting zeal. No tradesman could safely take advantage of her charges by so much as a farthing. Mary Lamb submitted to her will entirely, yielding the reins so completely that she never wished to take them up again. Charles depended on her company and fell into low spirits on her rare day off. Among her other talents, Becky was something of a conversationalist; and although her gift was chiefly used to lecture her employers on their lack of practicality, her conversation was still valued. As Charles said of it: 'Scolding and quarrelling have something of familiarity and a community of interest—they imply acquaintance—they are of resentment, which is of the family of dearness.' Becky's only defects were her comparative youth and health and optimism—which, after the manifold discouragements of fifteen years spent in the Hazlitt and Lamb households, led her to embrace marriage. By this summary act she vanished from their record.

The fame she had achieved meant nothing to her. If she left children or descendants who might have valued it, they would have had difficulty in recognizing her as the simple Becky of the biographical and literary indexes. An able and efficient servant, she had been a reality in the life of Charles Lamb for nearly a decade. Who knows what she may have contributed to the career of Elia? Who knows, indeed, to what extent any literary career is dependent on what is happening in the kitchen?

Lamb's retirement from India House came unexpectedly. A letter to Bernard Barton, written only a short while previously, gave no hint of what was to come. To this correspondent, who had spoken of resigning from business to devote himself to literature, Lamb wrote: 'Throw yourself on the world without any rational plan of support, beyond what the chance employ of Booksellers would afford you! Throw yourself rather, my dear Sir, from the steep Tarpeian rock, slap-dash headlong upon iron spikes. If you had but five consolatory minutes between the desk and the bed, make much of them, and live a century in them, rather than turn slave to the Booksellers. . . . Keep to your Bank, and the Bank will keep you. Trust not to the Public, you may hang, starve, drown yourself, for anything that worthy *Personage* cares. I bless every star that Providence, not seeing good to make me independent, has seen it next good to settle me upon the stable foundation of Leadenhall . . . Henceforth I retract all my fond complaints of mercantile employment, look upon them as Lovers' quarrels, I was but half in earnest. Welcome, dead timber of a desk, that makes me live.'

Unfortunately, Lamb was not able himself to follow this advice, although it probably represented his real feelings. About two years after writing this letter he suddenly made up his mind to retire. With his chronic instability of temperament, he placed impulse above feeling and slipped out of the last firm groove which kept him firmly balanced. The step was made all too easy by India House. 'The relief', said Lamb sententiously, 'was hinted to me from a superior power'. A fortnight before his birthday—the anniversary on which Lamb would become fifty years of age—he sent in his application for release. Sir George Tuthill, a physician and a personal friend, gave him a certificate of ill health, to which Coleridge's Mr. Gillman added a further written opinion. Between the filing of his application and his final retirement a scant nine weeks elapsed. During the brief period Lamb suffered acutely from suspense, although all the circumstances indicated that the outcome was certain. On the 29th of March 1825 the irrevocable step was taken, and Lamb walked out of India House for ever.

His associations there meant much more to him than he realized. The Compound in which he worked with others had

come to be his second home. There, every day from ten to four, he was to be found at the same spot. Whatever may be said of Lamb's industry as a clerk, his regularity is unquestioned. He was probably right in declaring that 'for six hours every day I have no business which I could not contract into two'. In his case at least the extra four hours were not wasted. With the other clerks around him he maintained cordial, if eccentric, relations. Among them were Brook Pulham, Charles Ryle, and Walter Wilson, whom he liked; Henry Wood and Henry Dodwell, whom he liked rather less; and Ogilvie and Chambers, about whom he said nothing but who left reminiscences of him. According to these two, Lamb was a privileged character, allowed to vent his wit on the higher-ups and addressed by all and sundry as 'Charlie'. The India House office had a warmth for him analogous to 'the sweet security of streets' which he so praised. His retirement from business meant that he had lost this kind of security.

At the time of his retirement Charles Lamb was receiving a salary of £730 a year. His pension was fixed at £450. 'But by cropping of wine, old books, etc., and, in short, all that can be called pocket money, I hope to be able to go on at the Cottage', he wrote. He did go on as usual at the Cottage; and he also went on with the services of Becky. There was no visible cut in the Lambs' standard of living. He told a friend at the time that he had accumulated no savings previous to his retirement. Yet eight years later he was known to have £2,000 put away.

If Lamb had saved this sum out of his pension, it was an incredible feat. Most probably he had had the margin all along, from his father's small property and his brother's bequest. Apparently his statements about his income must all be taken with a grain of salt. All his life Lamb feared starvation and penury, and his anxiety led him into an undue secretiveness and silence about money. He could scarcely have told the truth about his finances had he wanted to. He seems to have been a good business man in his own way, managing his resources with the shrewdness and foresight that might have been expected of an India House bookkeeper. He retired with a pension sufficient for security. The risks he so unwisely took lay in other fields.

As a matter of fact, Charles Lamb was supporting three persons, not merely two, when he retired from business. Emma Isola, a motherless girl who had first entered the Lambs' home as a holiday guest, had ended by becoming a fixture there. Charles and Mary Lamb had gradually taken over the responsibility for her from an aunt with whom she was living when they met her in 1820. After her father's death in 1823, Emma Isola had no other home. There is no record of official adoption by Lamb, but she is usually spoken of as his adopted daughter. This practically described the relation that had come about.

Emma's Italian origin, sad history, and lonely condition had a strong appeal for the sympathetic Lambs. Her father, a beadle in Cambridge University, had lost his wife early and had been left with several daughters, whose future became a problem to friends and relatives. His father had been Agostino Isola, a popular teacher of Italian in Cambridge, whose benevolent tradition still helped to sustain the son in a poorly paid post. Isola had married an English wife in Cambridge and from her sprung the family of daughters, of whom Emma was one.

Emma lived with her mother's sister, Miss Humphreys, in Trumpington Street. The aunt sometimes played whist with a neighbour, Mrs. Paris, whose brother William Ayrton was one of Charles Lamb's friends in London. When Lamb and his sister came to Cambridge for their holidays in 1820 they joined in the whist party. An eleven-year-old girl, lingering near the card-table, was kindly noticed by the guests from London and invited to spend next Christmas with them in Russell Street. Both Charles and Mary were habitually kind to children, and Mary had an especially soft spot in her heart for girls of Emma's age. The Christmas visit was duly paid and prolonged through January. After this first stay Emma came frequently and the hospitable Lambs always strove to make her feel at home.

Miss Humphreys manifested no tendency to keep a strict hold on her niece. More and more she resigned the young girl to the Lambs' willing hands. Isola's death coincided with their removal to Islington, where Emma is found occupying the guest-room, with a resulting crimp in Lamb's usual hospitable style. From this time forth he assumed the responsibility of a guardian.

At first he and Mary spent a great deal of time in teaching the girl and later he sent her to a boarding-school. He must have kept her at the Dulwich school from the age of fourteen to nineteen; that is, for the first years after his retirement from business, when he was supposedly making retrenchments in his personal expenses. In his letters of this time Lamb scarcely makes any mention of his generosity to Emma, but he evidently spared no cost to ensure her future and prepare her for an independent and responsible life.

Charles Lamb indulged Emma Isola from the first. At the time of her first visit to London he allowed the eleven-year-old girl to keep late hours and see too much company. Lamb believed her beautiful, charming, and intelligent. He always wrote rapturously, dotingly, about her. She was 'a silent, brown girl . . . somewhat of a pensive cast', 'a girl of gold', 'a nut-brown maid'. He found it difficult to refer to her without garnishing her image; though, to do him justice, he could also keep silent about her. That Emma exerted the same attraction for others seems unlikely; for Lamb's closest friends remembered her but slightly, and only as connected with the Lambs' background. She received little notice for her own sake. In this respect she shines unfavourably by comparison with the maid, Becky.

Emma Isola may well have been very pretty in a dark, harmonious, conventional way. A portrait of her published at the time of her death, half a century later, shows that she had handsome and regular features. Her intelligence is more open to question; for, excepting that she early showed a practical and Philistine judgement, she betrayed no other intellectuality of any kind. There is every reason to believe that Emma was a burgeoning specimen of the average woman, whom Charles and Mary would have regarded with indifference could they have seen her in her completed development.

Emma's coldness to all things that interested the Lambs most—books, for instance—was total and unaffected. 'I wish I could cure her of making dog's ears in books', wrote Charles of her as a little girl. The Dulwich boarding-school seems to have done little to develop her in this regard. After several years of its advantages Charles and Mary decided that they must still see what more they could do. 'You remember Emma', wrote Mary to Lady Stoddart. 'She is now with us;

and I am moving heaven and earth, that is to say, I am pressing the matter upon all the very few friends I have that are likely to assist me in such a case, to get her into a family as governess; and Charles and I do little else here than teach her something or other all day long. We are striving to put enough Latin into her to enable her to begin to teach it to young learners.' By this time Emma had turned eighteen and it had become evident even to the lenient Lambs that her complete dependency should come to an end.

That Lamb's devotion to his ward survived his efforts to teach her Latin is proof of its deep-rootedness. Emma's resistance to learning was to him, as to Mary, unbelievable. But a few caustic and humorous remarks from his pen dispelled his annoyance and restored the old subservience. Emma continued to be the companion of his rambles, which in succeeding years, and perhaps in consequence, became more and more unrestrained. Probably the hardest work that Emma ever did was keeping up with Lamb on his endless walks. In this he realized an old dream, once described in a letter to Wordsworth: 'I had thought in a green old age . . . to have retired to . . . the Ware Road, there to have made up my accounts with heaven and the company, toddling about between it and Cheshunt, anon stretching on some fine . . . morning to Hoddesden or Amwell, careless as a beggar, but walking, walking ever, till I fairly walk'd myself off my legs, dying walking!' On one of their walking trips they went as far as Widford, a distance of about twenty-four miles. Emma arrived with feet so sore and blistered that her friends put her to bed for a couple of days.

Mary Lamb manifested some concern about her brother's rambles. To Miss Mitford's father, who called on her in 1826, she confided the opinion that Charles's walks were 'over-long'. She might have been thinking of the long hours of Emma's society to which they committed him. Her interest in Emma, as in other young girls, was uniformly gentle, maternal, evocative. To such an interest Emma gave but a negative response. For Lamb, on the other hand, she had a ready laugh at his jokes, a gentle persuasion not to drink, and a willingness to trudge the open road with him. Yet Mary continued to preserve the attitude of guardian and protector towards a young girl who had obviously not the least need of her.

Some suggestion of precocity exists in Emma Isola in the



matter of looks. In her own way Emma was early grown up. Lamb referred to his protégée in his letters as 'Miss Isola'. The young lady into whom the girl had so quickly developed stood on her dignity and demanded her dues. She resented it exceedingly if anyone addressed her by the name of 'Lamb', as on one occasion the local doctor did in writing a prescription. Lamb judged it necessary to take the doctor severely to task for this error. But Emma's brand of precocity did not lead her to discover the dark past of Mary Lamb. This seems to have escaped her in spite of the opportunities of a boarding-school. Indeed, Mary's story was by now old and forgotten.

The following episode is related by Mrs. Gilchrist in her life of Mary Lamb: 'Emma Isola, Lamb's adopted daughter . . . once asked her, ignorant of the facts, why she never spoke of her mother and was answered only with a cry of distress.' Mrs. Gilchrist continues. 'Probably the question coming abruptly and from a child confronted her in a new, sudden and peculiarly painful way with the tragedy of her youth.' When and how Emma Isola found out the truth is not included in Mrs. Gilchrist's story. One can believe, however, that for the level-headed, practical-minded young lady the shock, whenever it came, was not too great.

Facts of any kind no longer mattered. A situation had grown up, gradually and imperceptibly, which seemed all the stronger for never having been formally entered into by any of the parties. Succeeding circumstances and events could not change it. Charles Lamb had become enmeshed in it for the rest of his life; and Mary Lamb, because of Charles, for a good part of what was left of hers. It was a drama in itself—a conflict between the Philistine and the Romantic in which the Philistine was bound to win.

## 7

After the Lambs moved out to Islington, the pattern of Charles's life changed completely. The gaiety and debonairness of the Bohemian were laid aside. He had the illusion that by moving to Islington he had become a gentleman. But if by becoming a gentleman he had gained the depression of spirits and the low state of health that followed, he had done better to have avoided the promotion. As a Bohemian, Charles had

always been exact and demanding about the quality of his acquaintances—according to standards set by himself, to be sure. As a gentleman, he relaxed those standards considerably. To be a friend of Charles Lamb no longer carried the same mark of distinction as formerly.

Still, as always, young men whose talents and future were as yet undecided sought him out and asked him for help and advice. Such a young man stood at the front door of the Islington cottage one day early in 1824 and lifted the knocker diffidently. Edward Moxon was barely twenty-two years of age and was employed as a clerk in the publishing firm of Longmans, Green. He carried in his pocket a sheaf of poems to submit to Lamb for criticism. So many young men came to Lamb in those days on similar errands that he is said to have injured his eyesight poring over their manuscripts. But few remained long as friends or correspondents. The new pilgrim was different; he was destined to become an intimate. Young Moxon's background assured him of Lamb's attention in advance, regardless of the merit of the poems in his pocket.

A staunch, kind-hearted lad, with a Yorkshire burr to his tongue, Moxon had slipped the bonds of caste in the same way as Lamb. The son, the grandson, and the great-grandson of weavers, he had earned a scholarship in a West Riding school similar to Christ's Hospital in London. Too learned at nine years of age to enter the weaver's trade, he had been apprenticed to a provincial publisher. In his early teens he had made his way to London with the proverbial stick and bundle. At nineteen he had received the position of a publisher's clerk, the greatest event in his life up to then. A still greater event, never to be superseded in importance, was his meeting with Charles Lamb.

Moxon won his intimacy with Lamb by simple, homely services which had little to do with literature *per se*. He made himself essential to Mary by bringing the newest novels from his employer's stock for her enjoyment before publication. 'He is Mary's Bodley', said Charles. Lamb himself is said never to have read a novel. Mary became one of the first of those thousands of reprehensible women who neglected their housekeeping to pore over romances. For Charles, however, Moxon also had his value. He would sit endlessly over long

tankards of ale which Charles liked to fetch himself from the old Islington Queen's Head. Sincere though he was, Moxon was not without shrewdness when it came to judging character, especially the characters of the great lights of literature. This seems, in fact, to have been his outstanding talent—one which stood him in good stead in his later career as a publisher.

With Lamb's help, Moxon expanded his acquaintance with authors. Introduced by Lamb to Samuel Rogers, the banker poet whose fame was roseate in those days, Moxon brought out his sheaf of poems dedicated to his new friend. His eyes next turned avidly towards the cold bright Northern Star of English poetry. 'My dear Wordsworth,' began the letter Lamb wrote for him: 'the bearer of this is my young friend, Moxon. He is one of Longmans' best hands, and can give you the best account of the Trade as 't is going. . . . Moxon is but a tradesman in the bud yet, and retains his virgin honesty. . . . He is the author besides of a poem which for a first attempt is promising . . . Rogers has paid him some proper compliments, with sound advice intermixed. . . . Pray pat him on the head, ask him a civil question or two about his verses, and favour him with your genuine autograph. He shall not be further troublesome. . . .'

This faint praise does not show Lamb at his best as a friend. If Wordsworth's name was absent from the list of English poets later published by Moxon, this note may have been a part of the reason. Perhaps it did not even do justice to young Moxon as a man about town and a frequent guest at literary parties. He partially filled a place in the city left vacant by Charles Lamb. Moxon and Lamb had a number of qualities in common, among them the habit of sampling literary geniuses. Their association was due to grow more intimate and equal as time went on.

Presently young Moxon gave over his ambition to become a poet and decided instead to become a publisher of poets. Already experienced in the trade at twenty-five, he left Longmans and opened his own business in New Bond Street. Samuel Rogers, who financed him, did not take a very desperate risk. It is not unlikely that Lamb also furnished some of the sinews of war; but that may have come later. What Lamb really did contribute to the new firm was its first published book. *Album of Verses and Other Poems; by Charles Lamb*. The work did not add much

to Lamb's fame nor launch the Edward Moxon imprint with glowing colours.

Lamb's critical enemies seized upon the trivial quality of the *Album Verses* to prove that his gifts had fallen off. Lamb was excessively hurt. However, the sharp attacks caused one of Lamb's oldest friends to spring to his rescue. Robert Southey wrote and published the oft-quoted poem beginning:

*Charles Lamb, to those who know thee justly dear  
For rarest genius, and for sterling worth,  
Unchanging friendship, warmth of heart sincere,  
And wit that never gave an ill thought birth,  
Nor ever in its sport infix'd a sting;  
To us who have admired and loved thee long,  
It is a proud as well as pleasant thing  
To hear thy good report, now borne along  
Upon the honest breath of public praise  
We know that with the elder sons of song  
In honouring whom thou hast delighted still,  
Thy name shall keep its course to after days  
The empty pertness, and the vulgar wrong,  
The flippant folly, the malicious will,  
Which have assailed thee, now, or heretofore,  
Find, soon or late, their proper meed of shame;  
The more thy triumph, and our pride the more,  
When witling critics to the world proclaim,  
In lead, their own dolt incapacity.*

As for Moxon, he needed but a little push to start him on his career as publisher. He cultivated the position he had gained through Lamb as the companion of literary men. But in this as in many other ways he kept his independence of action. He was never a conventional publisher. His list of authors, beginning with Lamb and Coleridge and ultimately including Tennyson, Keats, Shelley, Browning, and Mrs. Browning, suggests that his association with poets was not accidental but an abiding emotional need.

The Yorkshire weaver's son had a mission to fulfil and he fulfilled it. It was largely with Charles Lamb's assistance that he was able to do this. He was one of Lamb's finest bequests to the later nineteenth century.

## CHAPTER VIII

### *Women must Work*

FEW people realize to-day what a large part women played in the English scene of the early nineteenth century; how restless, how independent, how important they were. Mary Lamb was far from being the single swallow which partially foretells the summer; she was one of the flock which fully heralds it. In paying a compliment to Fanny Burney, Edmund Burke said of her that she belonged to 'an age distinguished by having produced extraordinary women' Burke's description of the age is no exaggeration. If Mary Lamb's name were listed along with those of all the famous women of her time, it would be found in a numerically imposing company. The vanguard to which she belonged was not a mere sprinkling of brilliant individuals. Nor did they exist entirely in isolation; there was a strong tie of union among the pioneering band. Charles Lamb had no understanding of this background of his sister's. In her connexion with her sex, Mary lived her own personal, independent, aspiring life.

But many years before Mary's maturity—about the time of her birth, in fact—the Bluestocking clubs flourished in London. The Bluestockings, albeit of impeccable social and economic position, were distinguished nevertheless by a revolutionary thought. Conservative in most respects, these ladies rebelled against the current notion that women's brains were not equal to men's. Moved by their rebellion, they wrote and published letters and books, conducted literary drawing-rooms, and stood forth like staunch Amazons for the defence of their cause.

In spite of themselves and unconscious of their work, they became revolutionary clubs. Hundreds, even thousands, of girls in remote, hidden corners, like Sarah Stoddart in the village of Sarum and Mary Lamb in the servants' quarters of Mr. Salt's establishment, heard of their exploits and felt their example. The individual banner-bearers, Mrs. Montagu, Mrs. Delaney, Mrs. Boscawen, bore names too aristocratic to travel

very far, belonging as they did only to what represented in those days the smart society column of ours. But the general term 'Bluestocking' travelled far and wide and became the popular word for a new type of woman. Regardless of the exclusive class of the originators, they supplied still another idea in the democratic ferment.

With the revolt of the Bluestockings came other forms of rebellion. They had set an example for all restless ladies. Upper-class women who could not make similar pretensions to intellectual leadership felt that they still had something resembling rights. Seeing that the Bluestockings had escaped certain conventions, these lesser sisters felt the urge to break their bonds also. Of what use were gentility and fortune if they did not help the owner to get what she wanted? Ladies must live their own lives. A growing class of well-born spinsters appeared on the social scene, ignoring marriage with apparent immunity. The spectacular examples of this type of rebel were the Ladies of Llangollen, the eccentric pair who made of their rebellion a successful and brilliant career. By simply living consistently as dedicated spinsters, they created a legend and left famous names behind them. The Ladies of Llangollen appear to have been not so far behind the Bluestockings in social influence

## 2

Next comes a group of women who were only incidentally Bluestockings. It must be admitted that among the intellectuals and the Llangollen types existed a good deal of dilettantism. In those romantic days, however, personality was its own excuse for being; this was true among men as well as among women. Charles Lamb, for instance, owed a large part of his reputation to his unique actions, attitudes, and friendships. Ladies could lay claim to exceptional personalities by a similar behaviour. But by contrast with these salon heroes and heroines a whole phalanx of professional women had arisen. They had trained themselves for a specific and exacting occupation—that of writing. They already formed a successful, influential, popular class of persons. So numerous and professional were they that they give to an otherwise quaint period a distinctly modern note.

Restricted to no one branch of writing—any more than

women writers in our time—these pre-Victorian women seem to have been most successful with the novel. It may be because the novel was left to them as one of the lesser literary spheres. Lamb, Coleridge, Southey, and Hazlitt looked down on the novel as a secondary, if not as an outcast literary form. Could they but have foreseen how time was to change all this, they would only have scorned time. But women writers cultivated the left-over field handsomely and won reputations for themselves, some of which still send forth an audible sound.

Jane Porter produced for her delighted public *Thaddeus of Warsaw* and *Scottish Chiefs*; Maria Edgeworth won shining fame with *Castle Rackrent*; Elizabeth Inchbald graciously pleased with *A Simple Story*; Lady Sydney Morgan created a public sensation and won a title with *The Wild Irish Girl*; Elizabeth Bengier captured applause with *The Heart and the Fancy*; Eliza Fenwick published her ewe-lamb, *Secrecy*; Fanny Burney outdistanced them all with *Evelina* and its companions; and Jane Austen quietly penned for an undying public her *Pride and Prejudice*.

Nor were these best-sellers, as a rule, the only novels of their authors. The novelists piled up long lists of works of fiction; their industry was sustained and professional. The publishers, whom Lamb so loved to anathematize, found readers for all that they could produce. Some of them, however, must have tasted the bitterness of hard times just as novelists have since done. It is said of Elizabeth Bengier, one of the most gallant and successful, that her circumstances were straitened to the last. This is not surprising. The really surprising thing is that so many women managed to survive at all while maintaining themselves by fiction. Their numbers and their triumphs form a distinguishing mark of their era. As if to express more fully the contemporary importance of her sex, Mary Matilda Betham published a compendious *Biographical Dictionary of the Celebrated Women of Every Age and Country*. It still survives as an evidence of the author's phenomenal industry and of the strong public interest in women's achievements.

Another field pre-empted by women was writing for children. This was a popular and flourishing acre. William Godwin, as we know, had started a publishing business solely for the printing of juvenile books. Mary Wollstonecraft began her

career as an author by writing for children. Mrs. Trimmer and Mrs. Schimmelpenninck turned out quantities of children's books with a moral or religious slant. Letitia Barbauld, the most successful of the group, specialized in instructive stories for the young. Charles and Mary Lamb had produced children's tales frankly hoping to make money. If they had failed in this, it was mainly because of an impractical publisher and his unpopular name. In the last analysis, most of the work by which Mary Lamb earned her fame was addressed to young readers. Here she was at home with many other women in a congenial spiritual sphere.

## 3

The favourite occupation of genteel spinsterhood was teaching. The education of girls was left to the unmarried women of respectable origin—women who sallied forth like guerilla leaders, here and there and everywhere, and battled for survival with amazing energy. Many of them, of course, went down silent and unsung in the confused struggle. But many of them remained, at scattered spots up and down the country, and left their mark on the *mores* of England. The conspicuous example of such teachers was that of Hannah More and her sisters of Bristol. The Misses More's school flourished and enabled them to retire in time with a considerable fortune. Mrs. Fricker and her five daughters, also at Bristol, conducted a boarding-school for a while. With families being what they were in England, the race of schoolteachers was constantly recruited from the surplus feminine progeny; and as neither schools nor careers were of long duration, new positions always seemed to be available. Women rose up to fill the vacancies left by women, and so their sex continued to dominate the teaching of girls.

It is not to be assumed for a moment that Mary Lamb's shrewd and observant mind remained untouched by the current developments affecting her sex. As a girl she had fallen in behind the Bluestockings to the extent of asserting that she could learn Latin as well as her brothers. Though she never visited the Ladies of Llangollen, her intimate friends Sarah Hutchinson and Mary Matilda Betham made the pilgrimage to Wales and brought back detailed accounts. Of the women teachers, Hannah More must have impressed her most. But



besides being a boarding-school preceptress, Miss More was also a political influence on the reactionary side. Both of Mary's brothers expressed a scathing opinion of Hannah More, and Mary could not but have followed them in this. Neither could she have much admired Mrs. Fricker, Coleridge's hated mother-in-law. But she had met somewhere and somehow an anonymous ideal whom she incorporated in the gentle 'Mrs. Leicester' of her boarding-school story

Among the women novelists she had a good many personal acquaintances; so numerous was the group that it could not have been otherwise. And she would have known many more had it not been for Charles. But Charles's jealousy could not prevent Mary from knowing the story-tellers of the day through their published works. If she yearned to imitate their successes, she never expressed the yearning in any way. She was apparently content to know them and love them only through their books and only as a part of their insatiable public.

## 4

Mary had a keen awareness of her problems as a woman. The women of her day lived exclusively to please the men; it was not until much later in the Victorian century that any idea even slightly different arose. Mary's surface demeanour accorded entirely with the prevailing ideal. 'On the whole,' says Mrs. Gilchrist, 'Mary was a silent woman. It was her forte rather to enable others to talk their best by the charm of an earnest speaking countenance and a responsive manner.' This biographer dwells still further on Mary's orthodox femininity. 'In all her thoughts and feelings she was most womanly—keeping under even undue subordination to her notion for woman's province an intellect of rare excellence.' That Mary could have concealed beneath her modest surface a different view of herself is not suggested. That she really did do so, however, is certain.

She betrays the fact in a letter to her confidential friend, Sarah Stoddart. 'I make it a point of conscience', she wrote, 'never to interfere or cross my brother in the humour he happens to be in. It always appears to be a kind of tyranny that women have no business to exercise over men, which, merely because they, having the better judgement, have the power to do. Let men

alone and at last we find they come around to the right way which we, by a kind of intuition, perceive at once. But better, far better, that we should often let them do wrong than that they should have the torment of a monitor always at their elbows.' Holding this high opinion of her sex, Mary, who strove incessantly to please her brother and his guests, had feminine reserves at heart. Beneath a conventional exterior she nurtured reflections of a very different order.

Charles felt this rebellion in his sister and responded to it in his own way. His whimsical, even peevish remarks about women authors and intellectual females in general, among whom Mary had to be included, expressed his side of the argument. Like his sister, he took care to utter his opinion confidentially. 'Allsop records some conversation', says Lucas, 'at a Sunday dinner alone with Lamb when Lamb delivered himself of some very free utterances concerning authoresses. Spoke of Mrs. Inchbald as the only enduring clever woman he had ever known; called them impudent, forward, unfeminine, and unhealthy in their minds. Instanced, amongst many others, Mrs. Barbauld, who was a torment and a curse to her husband,—"yet", said Lamb, "Letitia was only just tinted, she was not what the she-dogs now call an intellectual woman".'

Though Mary was aware of her problems as a woman, she seems never to have cared about social rank. She never asked herself whether she was a 'lady' or not. Here she differed from her brothers, both of whom were at considerable pains to establish themselves as 'gentlemen'. Mary found their efforts slightly amusing. 'I wish you had heard Charles talk this nonsense over and over again,' she wrote to Dorothy Wordsworth, 'about . . . how he first felt himself commencing gentleman . . . Charles Lamb commencing gentleman!' Instinctively more democratic than the males of her family, she stood apart from both of them, especially from John, who theoretically defended the rights of the common man. This feeling in her triumphed over the fact that she, as an authoress, had as much claim as her brothers to be classed among the gentry. Somehow or other, she seems never to have wished or tried to pass over the line of social demarcation. She contented herself with remaining the exceptional daughter of an exceptional Temple servant. By others, of course, Miss Lamb was always regarded as a lady.

The memory of her humble origin and her sweated early years never left her. She was conscious of her place in the working class of her time. All of the Lambs had known poverty in their skins, but in their reactions they had struck out along divergent pathways. Charles's sympathies sided with the poor, but he had no flair or equipment for thinking objectively about them. That would have approached the field of science, for which he expressed the greatest horror and detestation. 'Science has succeeded to poetry no less in the little walks of children than with men', he groaned. 'Is there no possibility of averting this sore evil?' John Lamb did not share his brother's prejudice against science. Of John it may be assumed that he had read Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* and applied its principles to conditions around him. John, though a muddled thinker, would at least have influenced Mary to the extent of taking such scientific writing seriously—as seriously as novels and poetry.

As for Mary, she had her own approach to the labour problem, quite different from that of her brothers. Mary's memory went far, far back to her father's experience in supporting his family on low wages and to her own experience in supporting them later. While her brothers had been trained for gentlemanly occupations, she had been initiated as a hand-worker. One great cause of the family tragedy had been that Charles was so long nursed for the part of a gentleman. Mary, therefore, had her own realistic background on the problems of the wage-earners. She had felt these problems in her own life. She did not need to be told that they existed. As she grew older and more experienced and had leisure to observe conditions around her, she only allied herself the more closely to working-women who still had the same problems.

Besides, the influence of a great book of her time could not have failed to reach Mary Lamb. It would have been strange indeed if she had not read Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, published in 1792, while Mary Lamb was plying the seamstress's trade. Many an evening did Miss Lamb spend sitting under the portrait of Mary Wollstonecraft playing whist with the Godwins. Though the conversation of the Godwins rarely turned on the portrait, the inspiration of that countenance and the memory of that life must have spoken

eloquently at least to one of the whist-players Mary Lamb had probably never seen Mary Wollstonecraft in the flesh, although only five years' difference in age separated them. For as long as Mary Wollstonecraft lived in London, Mary Lamb was tied fast to her home work. But the later intimacy between the Lambs and the Godwins must have brought the *Vindication* vividly to Mary's mind, though its teaching would have been among the things about which she kept silent.

From the Godwins' parlour Mary Lamb sometimes went straight to the workrooms of Martha and Eliza Fricker. Those two less glorified of the Fricker sisters lived in London and earned their living as seamstresses. But for the interruption of strange and paradoxical events, Mary Lamb might still have been spending her days in the same manner. Martha Fricker, it is related, was fully as intelligent as her sisters who had married poets. If Mary Lamb talked with her about conditions in the seamstress's trade, she had the benefit of an excellent mind applied to ordinary facts. Through Martha Fricker she maintained a real contact with an occupation she had long since left.

If Mary Lamb, furthermore, had been led by her brother John to look on *The Wealth of Nations* and *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman* as interesting and attractive literature, she might have been inclined to see in these works something to imitate. Mrs Wollstonecraft had, in fact, set a specific example by using her experiences as a governess as the basis for her book. Mary Lamb had had equivalent experiences as a seamstress.

And if, lastly, she felt an inner prompting to exploit her convictions about women's work in writing, she did not have to depend on Charles for encouragement. Not only Martha Fricker but her friend Sarah Hazlitt was close at hand. The latter had always offered an encouraging word whenever the impulse to write came to Mary. Their long-standing woman's intimacy still had areas which excluded every male influence. One of these areas produced results in a unique and memorable adventure in writing.

When Mary Lamb wrote her 'Essay on Needle-Work', no one had yet thought of applying the newly invented principles of political economy to the occupations of women. Even Mary Wollstonecraft had not touched upon the economic aspects of

the woman problem in her book. Mary Lamb's attempt was a long leap forward in the dark. Her little essay was genuinely profound. It represented a purely original and unprecedented act of thinking. Dating from the beginnings of economic science, it entitles the author to a worthy place among the pioneers in that field. Though it was the only thing of the kind that she ever produced, it could not have happened except as the result of long years of silent and patiently pursued thought.

Mary had no idea that she had written anything of value, having only undertaken to furnish an article for the *British Lady's Magazine*. Her essay appeared duly in the number for April 1815, and naturally received but scant attention. The British ladies were not noticeably flurried by it. One can but hope that she at least received the payment that had been promised her. Complaining the while of the headache it had caused her, she told Crabb Robinson that she had written it for pay. Robinson mentioned it in his diary and thereby helped to call attention to a work that might otherwise have been forgotten. Charles Lamb never mentioned it.

The 'Essay on Needle-Work' was written, after the example of other polemical writers of the day, in the form of a letter. The kind of essay standardized by Hazlitt and Elia had not yet come into existence. Mary followed her own pattern, presenting a closely knit and concentrated argument in a quiet, slow-moving, Platonic development. Considering that the author wrote in a mob-cap and with a quill pen, a full generation before even the common sewing-machine was invented, her thesis exhibits a surprising grasp of modern ideas. In fact, we have not yet caught up with many of them. We all know to-day that the work of women in the home is still not adequately evaluated nor adequately paid for. But no one has stated the case more clearly and convincingly than did this lonely, self-questioning, clear-thinking spinster who wrote on the subject over a hundred years ago.

## 6

## ESSAY ON NEEDLE-WORK

*Mr Editor,* In early life I passed eleven years in the exercise of my needle for a livelihood. Will you allow me to address your readers, among whom might perhaps be found some of the kind

patronesses of my former humble labours, on a subject widely connected with female life—the state of needle-work in this country

To lighten the heavy burthen which many ladies impose upon themselves is one object which I have in view; but, I confess, my strongest motive is to excite attention towards the industrious sisterhood to which I once belonged

From books I have been informed of the fact upon which *The British Lady's Magazine* chiefly founds its pretensions, namely, that women have, of late, been rapidly advancing in intellectual improvement. Much may have been gained in this way, indirectly, for that class of females for whom I wish to plead. Needle-work and intellectual improvement are naturally in a state of warfare. But I am afraid the root of the evil has not, as yet, been struck at. Work-women of every description were never in so much distress for want of employment

Among the present circle of my acquaintance I am proud to rank many that may truly be called respectable, nor do the female part of them in their mental attainments at all disprove the prevailing opinion of that intellectual progression which you have taken as the basis of your work, yet I affirm that I know not a single family where there is not some essential draw-back to its comfort which may be traced to needle-work *done at home*, as the phrase is for all needle-work performed in a family by some of its own members, and for which no remuneration in money is received or expected

In money alone, did I say? I would appeal to all the fair votaries of voluntary housewifery whether, in the matter of conscience, any one of them ever thought she had done as much needle-work as she ought to have done. Even fancy-work, the fairest of the tribe! How delightful the arrangement of her materials! The fixing upon her happiest pattern, how pleasing an anxiety! How cheerful the commencement of the labour she enjoys! But that lady must be a true lover of the art, and so industrious a pursuer of a predetermined purpose, that it were pity her energy should not have been directed to some wiser end, who can affirm she neither feels weariness during the execution of a fancy piece, nor takes more time than she had calculated for the performance.

Is it too bold an attempt to persuade your readers that it would prove an incalculable addition to general happiness and the domestic comfort of both sexes, if needle-work were never practised but for a remuneration in money? As nearly, however, as this desirable thing can be effected, so much more nearly will women be upon an equality with men as far as respects the mere enjoyment of life. As far as that goes, I believe it is every woman's opinion that the condition of men is far superior to her own.

'They can do as they like', we say. Do not these words generally mean they have time to seek out whatever amusements suit their tastes? We dare not tell them we have not time to do this, for if they should ask in what manner we dispose of our time we should blush to enter upon a detail of the minutiae which compose the sum of a woman's daily employment. Nay, many a lady who allows not herself one quarter of an hour's positive leisure during her waking hours, considers her own husband as the most industrious of men if he steadily pursue his occupation till the hour of dinner, and will be perpetually lamenting her own idleness.

*Real business* and *real leisure* make up the portions of men's time; —two sources of happiness which we certainly partake of in a very inferior degree. To the execution of employments in which the faculties of the body or mind are called into busy action there must be a consoling importance attached, which feminine duties (that generic name for all our business) cannot aspire to.

In the most meritorious discharge of those duties the highest praise we can aim at is to be accounted the helpmates of *man*; who, in return for all he does for us, expects, and justly expects, us to do all in our power to soften and sweeten life.

In how many ways is a good woman employed in thought or action through the day that her *good man* may be enabled to feel his leisure hours a *real, substantial holiday* and perfect respite from the cares of business? Not the least part to be done to accomplish this end is to fit herself to become a conversational companion, that is to say, she has to study and understand the subjects on which he loves to talk. This part of our duty, if strictly performed, will be found by far our hardest part. The disadvantages we labour under from an education differing from a manly one make the hours in which we *sit and do nothing* in men's company too often anything but a relaxation, although as to pleasure and instruction time so passed may be esteemed more or less delightful.

To make a man's home so desirable a place as to preclude his having a wish to pass his leisure hours at any fireside in preference to his own, I should humbly take to be the sum and substance of woman's domestic ambition. I would appeal to our British ladies, who are generally allowed to be the most jealous and successful of all women in the pursuit of this object, I would appeal to them who have been most successful in the performance of this laudable service, in behalf of father, son, husband or brother, whether an anxious desire to perform this duty well is not attended with enough of *mental* exertion, at least, to incline them to the opinion that women may be more properly ranked among the contributors to, rather than the partakers of, the undisturbed relaxation of men.

If a family be so well ordered that the master is never called in to

its direction, and yet he perceives comfort and economy well attended to, the mistress of that family (especially if children form a part of it), has, I apprehend, as large a share of womanly employment as ought to satisfy her own sense of duty; even though the needle-book and thread-case were quite laid aside, and she cheerfully contributed her part to the slender gains of the corset-maker, the milliner, the dress-maker, the plain worker, the embroidress, and all the numerous classifications of females supporting themselves by *needle-work*, that great staple commodity which is alone appropriated to the self-supporting part of our sex

Much has been said and written on the subject of men engrossing to themselves every occupation and calling. After many years of observation and reflection I am obliged to acquiesce in the notion that it cannot well be ordered otherwise.

If, at the birth of girls, it were possible to foresee in what cases it would be their fortune to pass a single life, we should soon find trades wrested from their present occupiers and transferred to the exclusive possession of our sex. The whole mechanical business of copying writings in the law department, for instance, might very soon be transferred with advantage to the poorer sort of women, who, with very little teaching, would soon beat their rivals of the other sex in facility and neatness. The parents of female children who were known from their birth to be destined to maintain themselves through the whole course of their lives with like certainty as their sons are, would feel it a duty incumbent on themselves to strengthen the minds, and even the bodily constitutions, of their girls so circumstanced, by an education which, without affronting the preconceived habits of society, might enable them to follow some occupation now considered above the capacity, or too robust for the constitutions of our sex. Plenty of resources would then lie open for single women to obtain an independent livelihood, when every parent would be upon the alert to encroach upon some employment, now engrossed by men, for such of their daughters as would then be exactly in the same predicament as their sons now are. Who, for instance, would lay by money to set up his sons in trade, give premiums and in part maintain them through a long apprenticeship; or, which men of moderate incomes frequently do, strain every nerve in order to bring them up to a learned profession; if it were in a very high degree probable that, by the time they were twenty years of age, they would be taken from this trade or profession, and maintained during the remainder of their lives by the *person whom they should marry*. Yet this is precisely the situation in which every parent whose income does not very much exceed the moderate, is placed with respect to his daughters

Even where boys have gone through a laborious education, super-



inducing habits of steady attention accompanied with the entire conviction that the business which they learn is to be the source of their future distinction, may it not be affirmed that the persevering industry required to accomplish this desirable end causes many a hard struggle in the minds of young men, even of the most hopeful disposition? What, then, must be the disadvantages under which a very young woman is placed who is required to learn a trade, from which she can never expect to reap any profit, but at the expense of losing that place in society to the possession of which she may reasonably look forward, inasmuch as it is by far the most *common lot*, namely, the condition of a *happy* English wife?

As I desire to offer nothing to the consideration of your readers but what, at least as far as my own observation goes, I consider as truths confirmed by experience, I will only say that, were I to follow the bent of my own speculative opinion, I should be inclined to persuade every female over whom I hope to have any influence to contribute all the assistance in her power to those of her own sex who may need it, in the employments they at present occupy, rather than to force them into situations now filled wholly by men. With the mere exception of the profits which they have a right to derive by their needle, I would take nothing from the industry of man which he already possesses.

'A penny saved is a penny earned', is a maxim not true unless the penny be saved in the same time in which it might have been earned. I, who have known what it is to work for *money earned*, have since had much experience in working for *money saved*; and I consider, from the closest calculation I can make, that a *penny saved* in that way bears about a true proportion to a *farthing earned*. I am no advocate for women who do not depend on themselves for subsistence, proposing to themselves to *earn money*. My reasons for thinking it not advisable are too numerous to state—reasons deduced from authentic facts and strict observations on domestic life in its various shades of comfort. But if the females of a family *nominally* supported by the other sex find it necessary to add something to the common stock, why not endeavour to do something by which they may produce money *in its true shape*?

It would be an excellent plan, attended with very little trouble, to calculate every evening how much money has been saved by needle-work *done in the family*, and compare the result with the daily portion of the yearly income. Nor would it be amiss to make a memorandum of the time passed in this way, adding also a guess as to what share it has taken up in the thoughts and conversation. This would be an easy mode of forming a true notion and getting at the exact worth of this species of *home* industry, and perhaps might place it in a

different light from any in which it has hitherto been the fashion to consider it

Needle-work taken up as an amusement may not be altogether unamusing. We are all pretty good judges of what entertains ourselves, but it is not so easy to pronounce upon what may contribute to the entertainment of others. At all events, let us not confuse the motives of economy with those of simple pastime. If *saving* be no object, and long habit have rendered needle-work so delightful an avocation that we cannot think of relinquishing it, there are the good old contrivances in which our grand-dames were wont to beguile and lose their time—knitting, knotting, netting, carpet-work, and the like ingenious pursuits—those so often praised but tedious works which are so long in the operation that purchasing the labour has seldom been thought good economy. Yet, by a certain fascination, they have been found to chain down the great to a self-imposed slavery, from which they considerably or haughtily excused the needy. These may be esteemed lawful and lady-like amusements. But, if those works more usually denominated useful yield greater satisfaction, it might be laudable scruple of conscience, and no bad test to herself of her own motive, if a lady who had no absolute need were to give the money so saved to poor needle-women belonging to those branches of employment from which she has borrowed these shares of pleasurable labour—*Sempronia*.

If Mary Lamb had not written the 'Essay on Needle-Work', one would never have guessed how fully she perceived and shared the forward drive of the women of her period. Living always in the shadow of Charles Lamb and otherwise almost sedentary, she had few opportunities of declaring herself on the point. But by her one revealing and positive document, she showed that she belonged to the slowly gathering units that would in time unite into the woman movement. Her contribution was more than an essay; it was a manifesto. It deserves an honourable place and mention in social history, since it records one of those truly original and creative flashes of the human mind of which so few are in existence.

Mary's work has always just escaped receiving the recognition it deserved. The historians of the woman movement and the labour movement have consistently passed by her economic reasoning. The apparent slenderness of her effort has deceived them. But the slightness is only in appearance. The author saw the problems of women not only as wives and mothers but also as wage-earners. Her rounded view of things presented a

more comprehensive picture of their state than did the limited vision of her immediate followers. They were content with asking for the extension to some women of the privileges that some men enjoyed. Mary Lamb had the kind of insight that went straight to the heart of the whole complex business, domestic and industrial, of being a woman. She did not need a volume to express her concrete thought.

## CHAPTER IX

### *The Furies*

CHARLES LAMB entered on another new era of his life when he forsook Islington for Enfield. He had become acquainted with Enfield through Thomas Allsop, whose lodgings he had shared during one summer vacation. Lamb's imagination, for some reason—probably because of his cuckoo-like attachment to his friends—clung to Allsop's summer residence. In 1827, accompanied by Mary and Emma, he repaired to Enfield once more to spend the summer. When autumn came, he decided to remain permanently in the village. Becky, the indispensable, and all their goods and chattels were added unto them at Michaelmas and Lamb established them in a street on the Enfield green, specifically known as Chase Side.

The 'whitish' house in Islington was exchanged for a 'gam-bogey-looking' cottage, not exactly overlooking the New River, but still close to its banks, and situated about fifteen miles to the northward. The new house was small—about the same size as the tiny perpendicular edifice they had left. Lamb described it in a letter: 'Emma is with us, and our small house just holds us, without obliging Mary to sleep with Becky, etc.' Robinson's diary referred to the place as 'small but comfortable'. The point is made because the house shown to tourists in later years as Lamb's Enfield home was a large and impressive dwelling. Comparatively new when Lamb leased it, it was evidently remodelled and enlarged after his time. In Lamb's day it stood beneath tall elms; but the subsequent structure was open in front and adorned by Continental poplars. The place was typically English in all respects, including its strictly respectable suburban environment.

This particular action of Charles Lamb's brings us face to face with a growing change in his disposition and suggests a more specific investigation of his motives. On his first visit to Enfield he had written to a friend: 'We have been here near three months, and shall stay two or more, if people will let us

alone, but they persecute us from village to village.' The statement was, of course, perfectly groundless. The solitude of Islington had been only a shade less complete than the solitude of Enfield promised to be. Lamb was fleeing before an entirely chimerical danger. He went to enormous trouble, inconvenience, and expense to escape a wholly imaginary peril. A similar anxiety was never found in Mary, of whom, as the more guilty of the two, it might have been more logically expected

Lamb's life had been punctuated by these sudden, unexplained, almost compulsive changes. Miss Helen Robins, who edited his essays, counted up eleven different homes occupied by him in the space of thirty-five years. His restlessness has been generally dismissed by his biographers as one of his minor traits of temperament. A typical remark is that he moved in obedience to the 'changing tides of fortune as they ebbed and flowed in his . . . life'. As a matter of fact, it is rarely possible to find an objective reason in his circumstances for his migrations. In 1800, prior to moving from Pentonville to the Southampton Buildings, he had written: 'We can be nowhere private except in the midst of London.' This, at least, would have made good sense if he had not later fled to escape the curiosity of Londoners. The one consistent element in his behaviour is the desire to escape from people.

Mary seems to have played a negative part in this nomadism—so much so that she usually had one of her manic-depressive attacks during the moving. If Lamb noticed the coincidence, which was sufficiently marked for others to notice it, it did not affect his conduct. In his opinion, Mary's collapses were unpredictable anyway. Still, one might suppose that the mere possibility of preventing an attack would have chained him to the most undesirable dwelling. Such was not the case.

When he acquired the Enfield house, he greeted it with his usual delight: 'The neatest, compactest house I ever got—a perfect God-send.' Features of the place on which he congratulated himself were: 'Capital new locks to every door, capital grates in every room, with nothing to pay for in-coming.' A further detail of the new possession ran: 'Now you must know that I took this house of mine at Enfield . . . in my sister's name, to avoid the bother and trouble of parish and vestry-meetings.' Lamb liked his doors well locked, he liked a bargain, and he wished to be anonymous—that is, in a state of

partial concealment. Judging from the items that he valued, one concludes that his craving for privacy had grown greater with the years. The vibrant personality of the sometime literary Wednesdays strove to find peace and rest in barren solitude.

In this connexion, a curious facet of Lamb's personality needs to be turned towards the light. His pardonable desire to be considered a gentleman has been already mentioned. But in his dreams he played with more grandiose and fanciful dignities. He wrote in a letter to Manning: 'I have published a little book for children on titles of honour and to give them some idea of the difference of rank and gradual rising, I have made a little scale, supposing myself to receive the following various accessions of dignity from the King, who is the fountain of honour. As, at first; 1, Mr. C. Lamb, 2, C. Lamb, Esq., 3, Sir C. Lamb, Bart; 4, Baron Lamb of Stanford (where my family came from. I have chosen that if ever I should have my choice); 5, Viscount Lamb; 6, Earl Lamb; 7, Marquis Lamb; 8, Duke Lamb. It would look like quibbling to carry it further, and especially as it is not necessary for children to go beyond the ordinary titles of sub-regal dignity in our own country, otherwise I have sometimes in my dreams imagined myself still advancing; as 9th, King Lamb; 10th, Emperor Lamb; 11th, Pope Innocent; higher than which is nothing but the Lamb of God.'

This passage in the style of the merry hoaxes in which Lamb often indulged as a form of humour deserves weighing. It may be regarded as one of his trivia and dismissed as such. On the other hand, it seems to carry a foundation of seriousness beneath its fooling; a certain unconsciousness of its own humour, a meticulousness of detail not often wasted on a mere joke. One suspects that the whole pretended game was rather real to him. One looks in vain for a laugh at the end—a laugh at the idea of little Charlie Lamb, the waiter's son, as the god of the universe.

Some readers will already have recognized in these tendencies the approach to what is called the paranoid type of temperament. Charles may have had paranoid traits intermixed with his basically manic-depressive character. Mary's troubles were of almost purely manic-depressive origin. She succumbed to her seizures, and, after she recovered, went on as usual until she succumbed again. Charles's eccentricities were as some

of his biographers have noticed, almost constant. The criss-crossing of his tendencies produced a general effect of unhappiness and conflict running through his entire history. Mary, on the other hand, seemed to enjoy comparative peace and contentment in her life except at such times as she entered her completely alien phases. The so-called madness which was said to afflict brother and sister alike wore a separate and distinct mask for each. Madness is a term used for conditions which can be totally different; this is nowhere better illustrated than in the cases of Charles and Mary Lamb.

## 2

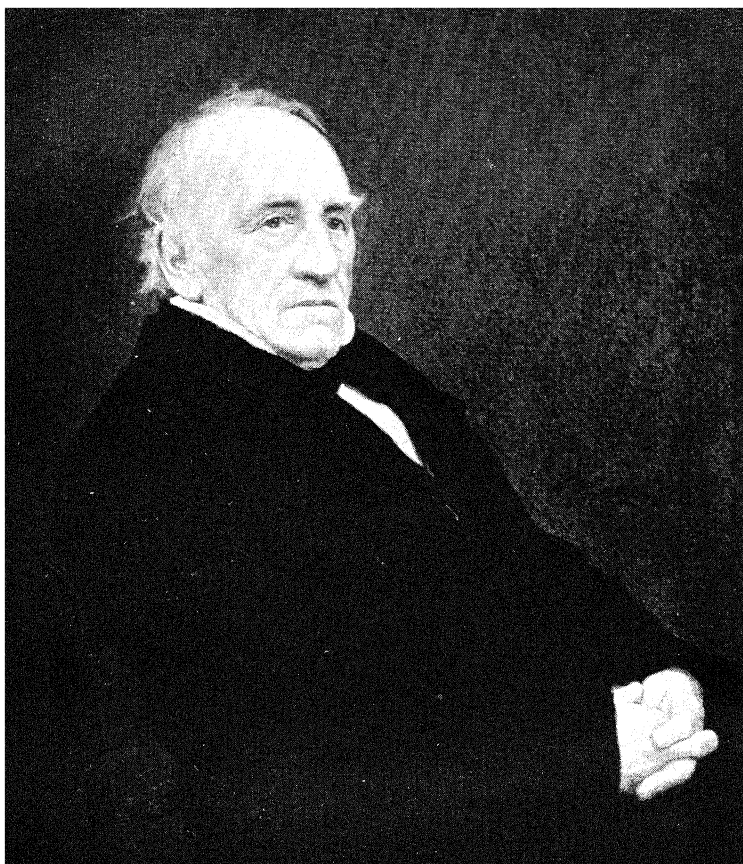
About 1819 William Hazlitt began to develop into the charming essayist as which posterity was to know him. It was at about this same time that Lamb's transformation into an essayist began. There was more than a coincidence in the fact that the two men started simultaneously to unfold their talents along the same line. Lamb and Hazlitt were spiritual brothers; their essay-writing started, probably unconsciously, from the same parent bud. That some rivalry should have arisen between them during the next following years is but logical. The story of a quarrel based on an accusation of plagiarism made by Hazlitt against Lamb dates from this period. If there was plagiarism, it was inherent in their backgrounds, and it was probably mutual.

Both Lamb and Hazlitt enjoyed the advantage of having always at their elbows a highly intelligent and inspiring woman. The part of Mary Lamb which went into the making of Elia is difficult to estimate, because the mystical identification between the brother and sister was so complete and all-pervading. At the Dalston lodgings, where Elia's first pattern was worked out, Mary sat by in the same room—a brooding, sheltering, developing presence. The relation between Hazlitt and his wife represents a more complex alliance. When Hazlitt accused his wife of misunderstanding and undervaluing his talents, he was merely being silly, as the brightest minds will sometimes become under the influence of anger. Hazlitt must have known that his best work was done during his marriage with Sarah—a union which lasted through the crisis of the divorce and through the period afterwards. Whatever Mrs.



THOMAS NOON TALFOURD  
Lamb's friend and first biographer





HENRY CRABB ROBINSON

Chronicler of the Lambs

*Painting by Henry Darvall [N.P.G.]*

Hazlitt's methods were—and Sarah Stoddart was one who never lacked originality—they had worked well with Mary Lamb and were later effective with William Hazlitt.

For some time after the Scotch divorce the Hazlitts lived as neighbours, he at the Hut, the little inn at Winterslow, and she in her cottage. Hazlitt sometimes exchanged Winterslow for London, while Sarah paid long visits to his mother in Shropshire. Their son, after the fashion of small English boys, lived chiefly at boarding-school. In 1824 this *modus vivendi* suddenly ended. Hazlitt married again. His bride, a widowed Mrs Bridgewater, remains as stubbornly elusive to the literary probe as John Lamb's Mrs Dowden. All we know about Mrs. Bridgewater is that she had a sizeable fortune and that she won Hazlitt's affection by professing to admire his writings. The contrast between her and Sarah Hazlitt in this respect is at once thrown into high relief. Otherwise Mrs. Bridgewater moves in a penumbral twilight zone surrounding the other marriage.

Fortified by his new wife's generous means, Hazlitt set forth for Paris and the Continent. At the age of forty-six he made the tour with the delirious joy of belated achievement. At last he fulfilled his glorious dream of seeing the master painters of Europe. The record of this curious honeymoon is contained in his *Notes of a Journey through France and Italy*. But it is not on notebooks like this that his fame as an author rests. The subject—painting—reflected a revived enthusiasm of his youth, and the style, the influence of the admiring Mrs Bridgewater. Leisure and comfort and a flattering companion were scarcely the media for Hazlitt's peculiar muse.

Mr. and Mrs. Hazlitt returned to London and lived for a while in Down Street. Little attention seems to have been paid to them there. The only guest who reports having visited them is the painter Benjamin Haydon, who implies that he found a perfectly ordered and cosy ménage, more to his taste than Sarah's. Their London residence remains on the whole more vague and shadowy than their Continental tour. English society in 1825, even the literary and Bohemian part of it, did not know how to assimilate two Mrs. Hazlitts at once. 'The letter I sent you', wrote Lamb to a friend, 'was one directed to the care of . . . India House, for Mrs. Hazlitt. Which Mrs. Hazlitt I don't yet know. . . . Really it is embarrassing.'

Once more the Hazlitts changed to Paris. It does not appear that Hazlitt had lost any of his bravado. He was now on the way to fulfil his heart's desire—the writing of a life of Napoleon. Once settled in Paris, he bowed his back sternly to this labour of love. Mrs Hazlitt stood by, apparently loyal, until the book was nearing completion; and then, as suddenly as she had appeared in Hazlitt's life, she dropped out of it. While her husband was absent on business in England, she closed her Paris apartment and departed for Switzerland. She sent no word of farewell or explanation, except the final, definitive message that she had gone for ever. With her went her fortune.

Hazlitt's mysterious second marriage and its more mysterious termination have given rise to much discussion. Neither he nor Mrs. Hazlitt told any tales. Speculation has been free to roam at will over the episode. After many years had passed, William Carew Hazlitt, the grandson of Hazlitt, brought the weight of family authority to bear on the enigma. It was really Hazlitt's boy, he said, who broke up the marriage. While on a visit to his father, the youth expressed his opinion of the way in which his own mother had been treated. According to the family chronicle, this so affected the second Mrs. Hazlitt that she ended by deserting her husband and abandoning her marriage. In the absence of any other explanation, the official story has been accepted generally by literary commentators.

Yet some, like Augustine Birrell and Mr P. P. Howe, have suggested quite different theories. Birrell thought that Mrs. Hazlitt might have been persuaded that her marriage was bigamous. It is possible that after three years of contentment with her legal status Mrs. Hazlitt's confidence had been finally shaken. Personal influences, like that of her sister, who was with her in Paris and who accompanied her to Switzerland, might have gradually preyed upon her mind.

Mr. P. P. Howe, the authority on Hazlitt, also discounts the family legend. He offers the opinion that 'the part Master Hazlitt played in his father's marriage has been greatly exaggerated, for some reason best known to himself'. But Mr Howe is too restrained a theorist to offer an independent or alternative reason. 'The question has now to be answered', says this fine critic and lover of Hazlitt, 'what brought these circumstances [Hazlitt's second marriage] to an end.'

There are, after all, a couple of theories which may be reason-

ably suggested. The first springs from the fact that the Hazlitts were on the point of returning to London, where Hazlitt expected to finish the writing of his *Napoleon*. We have already noted that Mrs. Hazlitt's social position in London as the wife of an anathematized radical and a divorced man had not been a pronounced success. Quite properly she may have dreaded a future in England with him; yet Hazlitt was not one of those Englishmen who could live out his life contentedly on the Riviera or in Italy. To have faced the problems at home would have required a great loyalty; and Mrs. Hazlitt's love, great as it might have been at first, had undoubtedly been subject to strain.

The simplest answer might be Hazlitt's difficult temperament. He was notoriously hard to get along with. Only a woman of strong imagination could cleave to him, because his peculiarities and vagaries taxed the understanding to the utmost. That the second Mrs. Hazlitt had this gift seems most unlikely. A streak of adventurousness had led her virtually to elope with him; but she gave no further signs of originality or independence. She was a gentlewoman, we are told authoritatively by Keats's friend Charles Armitage Brown, who met her in Italy. This must have made it hard for her to understand her husband. That she had a real ability to appreciate either him or his work seems most improbable. Without this, how could her love have become aught but thin?

The place of the first Mrs. Hazlitt in the picture of the second marriage has never been sufficiently noted. By the family historian, Sarah Hazlitt has been, almost on principle, neglected. Otherwise he might have found it odd that his grandmother went to Paris simultaneously with Hazlitt and his second wife. That the ex-wife and the ex-husband met in Paris is revealed by Sarah's letters. Their rendezvous was ostensibly for the purpose of discussing young William and his money affairs. Interviews of some kind certainly took place. Whether the second Mrs. Hazlitt knew of them is not revealed. But if she did, she may not have enjoyed the knowledge. Some sense of rivalry may have been stirred.

Returning to England, the first Mrs. Hazlitt still showed no want of aggressiveness. She pre-empted the place of daughter-in-law with Hazlitt's mother and did not yield it. By making her home with the old lady, Sarah gave the public

the impression that Hazlitt's mother was on her side, which was no doubt the truth. She kept up her kinship with Hazlitt's brother John and his niece, Peggy Hazlitt, whom she encouraged to become a novelist. In general she left only the outside track to her rival, should she eventually return to England. She filled widely and creditably the role of Mrs William Hazlitt and steadily maintained her tacit hold on the field.

Nothing in Sarah Stoddart's early life and history had prepared her for the part of a cast-off, broken-hearted wife. She could not humanly fit herself into the part. ('Lieutenant Stoddart would sometimes, while sipping his grog, say to his children, "John, will you have some?" "No, thank you, father." "Sarah, will you?" "Yes, please, father." Not . . . that she ever indulged to excess; but she was that sort of woman.') The record reveals no direct action on her part against the second Mrs. Hazlitt beyond the trip to Paris. There may have been none. Yet her attitude may have sufficed to rout her rival in the course of time by its consistency. The legend that Sarah's son broke up the second marriage contains less than a grain of truth in consequence. The disrupting influence was more probably Sarah Hazlitt's. It would not have been in her character to behave otherwise.

Hazlitt returned to England after Mrs. Hazlitt left him. He was already a sick man. Mary Shelley was the first to comment on his visibly failing health. As early as 1824 she wrote: 'When I saw him I . . . was never so shocked in my life. He is so changed and thin, his hair scattered, his cheek-bones projecting;—but for his voice and his smile I should not have known him.' He had long been a sufferer from gastric trouble and his condition had grown worse. He now had pecuniary problems of the first order to cope with. It was surely no credit to the second Mrs. Hazlitt that she left him in this penniless condition with his *Napoleon* uncompleted. His first task was to finish his book, which he did while living again in the Hut at Winterslow. He then returned to the uphill struggle with journalism in London. Handicapped as he was by his long absence and his increased illness, the going was not easy. Yet in the time that was left to him he did some of his most excellent work.

He had been suffering for an unknown length of time from

cancer of the stomach. On the 18th of September 1830 Charles Lamb, who happened to be staying in London, was summoned to Hazlitt's bedside. Young Hazlitt was with his father, as was Lamb, in his last hours. The scene was Soho, in whose somewhat shabby Continental atmosphere Hazlitt had found a congenial and cheap lodging. The dying man uttered certain memorable words on that day to those around him—words that have since been often quoted. 'Well, I've had a happy life', he said. Some have professed surprise at this summing-up of his life by a man who had been so harassed in all his public and private relations. It was Hazlitt's unique testimony as to what supreme and unbroken integrity can be worth.

Other last words have also found a permanent place in literature. He asked to see 'Mrs. Hazlitt'. This by a caprice of tradition has been handed down as a request to see his mother. Interpreted thus by William Carew Hazlitt, the tradition firmly dug itself into literary history. The simple inference that in asking for Mrs. Hazlitt the dying man was asking for his wife was thus whimsically avoided. Hazlitt's request shows that the amazing marriage had subsisted through all the wild and disturbing vicissitudes which had in appearance destroyed it.

At the time Sarah Hazlitt was probably living, as she often did, somewhere in the country. She had moved about a good deal from place to place. The Lambs usually knew where to find her, but sometimes they did not. Probably Charles could not have brought her to her husband's deathbed in time. One of those present—said to have been R. H. Horne, an English author who admired and imitated Hazlitt's writings—cut off a lock of the dead man's hair and sent it to Sarah. She wrapped it in a piece of paper, on which she wrote: 'William Hazlitt's hair, cut off the day after his death. Born 10th April, 1778. Died 18th Sept., 1830. Aged 52 years, 5 mos., and 8 days.'

After Mrs. Hazlitt's death this paper was found among her belongings. Along with it were the well-preserved letters of Mary Lamb, containing, as one knows, the reflected picture of Sarah Hazlitt's courtship and marriage with the essayist. The lock of hair, the letters, and her own diary concerning the divorce were all the record that was left of her marriage. The Victorian age could not understand a character like Sarah's or one like Hazlitt's, and they were both condemned on this evidence for their lack of feeling. It is more just to say that

they lacked sentimentality. With all their faults, they had strong qualities of character which united them. For them both sincerity and loyalty were the major touchstones of life.

## 3

By his early death Hazlitt escaped the bitter experience of declining talent. Though Charles Lamb lived but a few years longer, he was not spared this painful penalty of age. The conditions of his life after his retirement hastened the failure of his powers. The freedom from business which was to have allowed him at long last the lettered occupations he had always longed for, proved, ironically, to be his literary twilight. Shut off at Enfield, drooping in health, and deprived of almost all companionship except Emma Isola's, he naturally failed to produce his old gleeful phrases. His unacknowledged inspiration, Mary, had been rejected. Mary lived in the background. Crabb Robinson had provided her with spectacles, so that she could still lose herself in novels. Charles needed her now more than ever, but he did not know it.

To do Lamb justice, his intellectual desuetude was a reflection of the outside world. The sterile fruits of the long-enduring Tory repression had come at last. The prolonged war had wrought its devastating effect on the genius of Lamb's generation. Byron had died, Shelley and Keats had perished—all of them in exile. Hazlitt had ended in England, but standing up and facing the guns. Wordsworth and Southey had been conserved for a ripe old age, but stultified in the process. Godwin had been starved into quietness. Coleridge had been sacrificed to opium. Only the well-trained opportunist and the submissive herd man had been allowed to survive. It goes without saying that all budding genius had withered on the stem. That the youthful Dickens and Tennyson escaped the general slaughter was one of the incidental miracles of the times. In the dark interim all life of the spirit seemed to have been crushed out.

The publishing of books had become a mechanical business. The incumbents of the trade kept themselves afloat by hastily constructed volumes of annuals, anthologies, year-books, and albums. The practice was not without its advantages for the scholarly Charles Lamb. His genuine taste and skill as an antiquarian were called into service by some of the better sort

of compilations. He spent much time in the British Museum, always a congenial retreat for him, consorting with the geniuses of long dead years. Mary, reading all day at home, cordially approved of the British Museum, and Charles was at first enormously pleased with his intellectual home-from-home. 'It is a sort of Office to me; hours, 10 to 4, the same. It does me good.'

He was perusing the Garrick collection of plays for extracts which he sent to Hone's *Everyday Book* and *Table Book*. Apparently he nursed the intention of making another collection of *Specimens from the Time of Shakespeare* similar to those he had published twenty years before. Lamb had been justly proud of that work and in one of his better moods he saw how it could be continued. 'I have fighting in my head', he wrote, 'the plots, characters, situations, and sentiments of four hundred old plays (brand-new to me) which I have been digesting at the Museum, and my appetite sharpens to twice as many more, which I mean to discourse over this winter.' With Lamb, to discourse meant to write, not to converse or lecture. But when winter came he had moved out to Enfield and was out of reach of his daily visits to the Museum. All that came of his grand opportunity were the isolated extracts that appeared in the evanescent *Table Book*. It is such easy failures as this that make the last years of Charles Lamb's life such sad reading.

Elia suffered another and still greater misfortune. The amiable man stumbled into a trap set by that last resource of the book-publishers, the young lady's album. One of the signs of the inanity of the current world was the craze for this new invention. Lamb had always played games with his pen. Rhymed riddles and satires, acrostics, and whimsical verse-forms of all kinds had been a favourite amusement. They offered an easy release for his overstrained, but always verbal, mind. Previously they had found a harmless place in his notes and letters. But in the intellectual doldrums of 1830 he allowed a collection of these trifles to be published under the title of *Album Verses*. Edward Moxon issued the book from his new publishing house.

The reviewers of the day fell upon the *Album Verses* with gusto and gave themselves a thorough Roman holiday. The old insults to the Cockney Lamb were revived and newer and more cruel ones were added. 'Charles Lamb,—poor fellow!—



he looks more like a ghost than anything human and divine. His verses partake of the same character. They exhibit the fleeting, shadowy reflections of thoughts that, in their best days, were blessed with a very slender portion of substance.' Some of Lamb's friends tried to come to his rescue in print, but the malicious reviewers were shielded for the most part by their anonymity.

There can be little doubt as to what plunged Mary Lamb into the mental attack which followed. Among those who came to console Lamb in his embarrassment was Robert Southey. But 'the mere hearing that Southey had called at our lodgings totally upset her', wrote Lamb of his sister. 'Pray see Southey . . .' he continued, 'and excuse my not writing to him. I dare not write or receive a letter in her presence.' He added that he could not invite Southey to visit him for fear of exciting his sister. Mary had not forgotten, though Lamb seemed to have done so, that it was Southey's review that inflicted such fatal harm on the *Essays of Elia*. In her confusion she doubtless conceived that the same malign influence was again at work to injure her brother. Charles gave signs of being for once genuinely alarmed by Mary's behaviour. He removed her from the London lodgings where they had been temporarily staying and returned with her to Enfield. He seems to have been almost afraid of Mary at this time. As a matter of fact, Southey had done what he could in this instance to retrieve his former error. But like most conscience-offerings it came too late.

The final vindication of the *Album Verses* was not the achievement of Southey's defence but that of the much-abused author himself. Lamb's justification was a single poem dropped into the negligible collection—one of those sincere and touching self-revelations which were the gracious essence of his literary gift:

#### IN MY OWN ALBUM

*Fresh clad from heaven in robes of white,  
A young probationer of light,  
Thou went, my soul, an album bright,*

*A spotless leaf; but thought, and care,  
And friend and foe, in foul or fair,  
Have written 'strange defeatures' there;*

*And Time with heaviest hand of all,  
Like that fierce writing on the wall,  
Hath stamp'd sad dates—he can't recall;*

*And error gilding worst designs—  
Like speckled snake that strays and shines—  
Betrays his path by crooked lines;*

*And vice hath left his ugly blot;  
And good resolves, a moment hot,  
Fairly begun—but finished not;*

*And fruitless, late remorse doth trace—  
Like Hebrew lore a backward pace—  
Her irrecoverable race*

*Disjointed numbers; sense unknit,  
Huge realms of folly, shreds of wit,  
Compose the mingled mass of it.*

*My scalded eyes no longer brook  
Upon this ink-blurr'd thing to look—  
Go, shut the leaves, and clasp the book.*

## 4

The personal sadness of Lamb's later years came from his unhappy love for Emma Isola. The story has never been handled candidly because it tended to discount the romantic fraternal legend. Nevertheless, it must be added to the other contradictory experiences that characterized Charles Lamb's life. The effect of this last adventure of his upon Mary, who loved her brother better than her life, can only be imagined. Her solitary life at Enfield helped to obscure all but a few of her reactions concerning it.

There has been little literary discussion of Lamb's emotional life. In the nineteenth century it could be said, and was said, in tones with which one spoke of falling rose leaves, that Lamb was in love with his ward, Emma Isola. But in the many lives published around 1934, the centenary of Lamb's death, the romantic undertones could no longer be so acceptably employed. The usual alternative was to neglect the whole affair. Hence, the more modern the biography, the less the importance given

to the episode. The sentimental view of the nineteenth century approached more nearly to the facts.

One modern biography dismisses the story by a frank theory about Lamb's sexual nature. He was probably without strong passions, says the author, and renunciation of the flesh cost him but little. The author suggests as a reason for this theory that Lamb's writing shows no signs of sexual repressions. He further based his deduction on a consideration of Lamb's apparently frail physical constitution. In our informed scientific age this reasoning does not hold. As for Lamb's work showing no signs of repressed passion, the sad and painful reality is that it does. During the years of his emotional preoccupation with his ward he did practically no work at all. He acknowledged this in a letter to Patmore in 1831. 'For five years I have been feeling the necessity of scribbling but have never found the power' Among all the disturbing influences of life, his relations with the blooming young woman who lived on such intimate terms with him take a foremost place.

In the same year, 1831, Lamb wrote one of his jingling poems which contained the germ of a serious confession. The sense of the rhyme was that, however much resisted, love will come inevitably to all. Lamb was fifty-six, poor, and a hermit. His poem ended with these lines:

*Scornful beauty may deny him—  
He hath spells to charm disdain;  
Homely features may defy him—  
Both at length must wear the chain  
Haughty Youth in Courts of Princes—  
Hermit poor with age o'er come—  
His soft plea at last convinces;  
Sooner, later—Love Will Come.*

## 5

After several years of boarding-school Emma Isola had returned to Islington. About a year later, events took the course described by Lamb in a letter to Wordsworth: 'She was our inmate for a twelve-month, grew natural to us, and then they told us it was best for her to go out as a governess. . . .' Though he regarded the idea mournfully, he obviously realized that it made sense. Mary was even more enthusiastistic about

the plan. Together she and Charles bent themselves to the task of tutoring Emma. It would normally not have occurred to either of them that a young woman of eighteen should not prepare to earn her living. The apprenticeships of their youth bore fruit in their attitude towards the girl.

So Emma Isola became a governess. The retired, unworldly, dilatory Lambs actually succeeded in finding a place for her. In 1828 she went to the rectory at Fornham near Bury St. Edmunds, to take over the education of the rector's daughters. The connexion was made in all probability through the good offices of Henry Crabb Robinson, who owned some influence in Bury through his brother, a solid citizen of the town. Robinson was ever eager to do a good turn for Mary Lamb, from buying her spectacles and showing her Paris to helping her in her plans. The experiment developed successfully. There is no reason to suppose that Miss Isola, removed from the Lambs' intellectual standards, failed to measure up to the demands of the rectory. At any rate she remained in this place as governess for three or four years.

In the meantime she returned regularly to Enfield for holidays, vacations, and other leaves of absence. Enfield remained her home. She grew more attractive with the added years. 'Emma is looking weller and handsomer than ever', Lamb said proudly in a letter.

Emma's interests now included the unexampled new toy for young ladies, the autograph album. With the help of Charles Lamb, Emma's album became a treasure-house of celebrated names. A little shamefacedly it is true, Lamb exacted contributions for her book from friends like George Dyer, Bernard Barton, Walter Savage Landor, John Bates Dibdin, Barry Cornwall, John Keats, Robert Southey, and William Wordsworth. Lamb personally requested each contribution and wrote the letter of thanks in return. The effect of the correspondence is both humorous and sad. He had escaped from the slavery of India House to become the amanuensis of Miss Isola.

Lamb's young friend in no way belied her youth and average personality. She did just the things that might have been expected of her. At boarding-school she had acquired a bosom friend named Maria Fryer with whom she afterwards exchanged letters and visits. The affairs of Miss Isola and Miss Fryer, meticulously cared for by Lamb, came to occupy an appreciable

part of his time. Miss Fryer lived with her mama at Chatteris, somewhere in the country between Bury and Cambridge, and plainly bore the marks of country gentility. In the Dulwich School, Lamb had chosen for Emma the kind of place patronized by well-conditioned families. In view of the popular belief concerning his poverty, one is surprised to find him bestowing not only an education but also an expensive one.

In the midsummer of 1829 Lamb's relations with his ward came to a tragicomic climax. Disaster following upon disaster had occupied the season. Miss Isola, at home for her vacation, was to receive a visit from her friend Miss Fryer. Shortly before the visitor was due to arrive Mary Lamb was taken with one of her old seizures and sent away to a hospital at Fulham. There she remained, 'sadly rambling', said Lamb, 'and scarcely showing any . . . curiosity when I should come again'. She had still less curiosity about what was happening at home. Mary wandered in her secret labyrinth a full three months.

Meantime Lamb's life in the small country house with two bouncing young women induced a few of his more normal reactions. 'The young ladies are very pleasant,' he wrote, 'but my spirits have much ado to keep pace with theirs.' In the same letter he stated: 'I am very uncomfortable; and when Emma leaves me, I shall wish to be quite alone.' But when Emma did at last return to Bury, at the end of her long vacation, Lamb tried to escape the solitude of Enfield. He journeyed to London in pouring rain, seeking comfort and society. 'Never did the waters of heaven', he wailed, 'pour down on a forlorn head.' To complete his miseries, Becky, the faithful companion of the past ten years, had recently left him. Deprived of all of his women at once, Lamb mourned deeply and somberly: 'Home have I none.' This was an exaggeration; for the Enfield house, provided with a new, neat, willing maid, was waiting to receive him.

It is not strange that so much misery stirred his old desire for escape. He was 'obliged to quit' the well-built house he had occupied for the past two years. The Lambs' biographers usually say that he gave up housekeeping at this time because Becky had left him. His latest enthusiasm took on a new and revolutionary form, being concerned not with the house, nor any house, but with his prospective host. To Gillman, Barton, Wordsworth, he dashed off Elian epistles about the man under

whose wing he now proposed to take refuge. The locks, bolts, and privacy which he had hailed in the Enfield house were translated into the honours, dignities, and influence of old Thomas Westwood, with whom he proposed to board and lodge in the future.

This last change of Lamb's seems the saddest of all his visionary home-comings, primarily because it entailed the sacrifice of all the things necessary to a home. How must it have seemed to Mary, when she left her fantasy-life behind in Fulham, to come back to Charles and find him still functioning under the spell of his? She must have grieved to see the carpets, chairs, and kitchen furniture—the accumulation of their long years of housekeeping—pass under the auctioneer's hammer. Souvenirs of Charles and Mary Lamb were sold that day for prices that ranged from a farthing to a few shillings. Charles himself could not have found the ordeal so easy. 'The furniture', he had once written, 'which has been before my eyes all my life, a book-case which has followed me about . . . wherever I have moved—old chairs, old tables, streets, squares, where I have sunned myself, my old school—these are my mistresses.' In abandoning his household goods, he was symbolically casting off his personal mistress. 'Clothed we came into Enfield,' he wrote, 'and naked we must go out of it.'

## 6

Carrying only books, pictures, spoons, and snuff-boxes, the Lambs moved into Thomas Westwood's house. They had retired permanently as householders. Their host, a man of seventy, somewhat weak of sight and hearing, and besides a hunchback, promised Lamb Elysium. It would have seemed more fitting had the old man leaned on Lamb instead of vice versa. But it is fairly obvious that Westwood, with his diminutive stature, his liveliness, and his local dignities, shone with the reflected light of Lamb's old father. The illusion did not last permanently, but Lamb basked in the glow while it lingered.

Mr. and Mrs. Westwood, for their part, showed much responsibility in their care of the Lambs during the next few years. Lamb ended by disliking Westwood heartily for no discoverable reason beyond that the old man did not adequately resemble his father. But one need not imitate Lamb, as his

biographers have mostly done, by denying to the worthy man such virtues as he apparently possessed. He had accidentally stumbled into an ungrateful fame.

Charles Lamb had grown disillusioned with his love at the time of giving up the Enfield house. Still, Emma was with them as usual the following Christmas under the Westwoods' roof. Charles, Mary, and Emma celebrated the Yuletide season with their host's family. The hero of the festival was old Westwood, telling his well-worn stories, singing his old sea-chanties, and laughing his unrestrained laugh at his own and Charles Lamb's jokes. While the candlelight shone and the grog went round, time seemed to fall away for Lamb and the old Temple Christmas to live again. Also, in the homely and genial atmosphere, Emma Isola's charm seemed to have come back, if indeed it had ever gone away. Charles thought she had added some charms as well—a very possible thing at her age.

His affection was soon put sternly to the test. Emma had been gone away from Enfield only a few weeks when news came of her illness. She had taken cold on the journey to Bury and had developed serious results. The rector's wife, whose young daughters she was tutoring, had nursed her through the worst before letting Lamb know of it. They called her illness brain fever.

Lamb was distraught. His trembling hand dashed off notes in all directions breaking engagements and contracts. He could not see Wordsworth, who happened to be in town; nor John Murray, the foremost publisher of the day, who wished to arrange for another edition of the *Dramatic Specimens*. (The business with Murray was never concluded.) Lamb's thoughts were utterly and entirely absorbed by Emma's affliction. In his letters to the rector's wife he assumed the full responsibility for her welfare and protection and sent every reassurance of his loyalty and devotion.

Dear Mrs. Williams [he wrote]

May God bless you for your attention to our poor Emma! I am so shaken with your sad news I can scarce write. She is too ill to be removed at present; but we can only say that if she is spared, when that can be practicable, we have always a home for her. Speak to her of it, when she is capable of understanding, and let me conjure you to let us know, from day to day, the state she is in. But one line is all we crave. Nothing we can do for her, that shall not be done.

We shall be in the terriblest suspense. We had no notion she was going to be ill. A line from anybody in your house will much oblige us. I feel for the situation this trouble places you in

Can I go to her aunt, or do anything? I do not know what to offer. We are in great distress. Pray relieve me, if you can, by somehow letting us know. I will fetch her here, or anything. Your kindness can never be forgot. Pray excuse my abruptness. I hardly know what I write. And take our warmest thanks. Hoping to hear something, I remain, dear Madam, yours most faithfully,

C. Lamb

If Lamb had ever had the intention of giving up Emma Isola, it was blotted out of existence by her illness. In an instant the old association dropped back into the old well-scored grooves. As soon as communication with the Lambs was restored, Emma showed a sudden and marked improvement. Hearing the news, Mary Lamb was 'affected to an agony of tears' and Charles plunged once again into epistolary asseverations of devotion and gratitude. Three weeks later he journeyed to Bury and brought Emma carefully back to Enfield. 'It is our misfortune', he explained to Mrs. Williams, 'that long journeys do not agree with my sister.' Mary again was moved to tears of gladness at the sight of her young friend, who was now domiciled under the 'Westwoods' roof and as much at home there as her protectors.

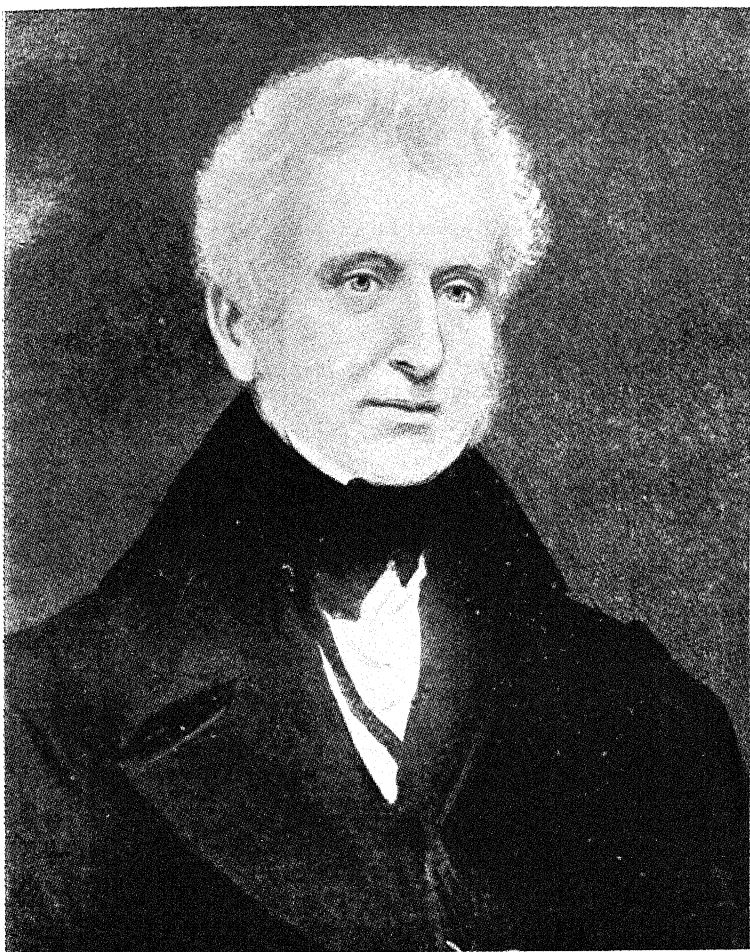
Restored in health, Emma returned to her position a month later, with the understanding that she was to remain another twelvemonth. The full term was accomplished; but when she came home at last, she again succumbed to an illness. She was cared for by the assiduous Lamb. 'In these [literary] trifles I waste the precious day', he wrote, 'while watching over the health of our more precious Emma, who has been sick in our house this long time.' From this time forward she had no further situation as governess. Her continued residence with the Lambs at the Westwoods' was interrupted only by short visits to her bosom friend, Miss Fryer, and to her aunt, Miss Humphreys, in Cambridge. The year 1831 passed in this way, bringing Emma every day nearer to the dangerous border of spinsterhood, and Lamb to the dangerous border of mania.



The year 1832 was one of the worst years of Charles Lamb's life. Crabb Robinson's diary carries the record of the year, inscribing, like a patient's hospital chart, the progress of his symptoms 'Met Kenny . . .' he said in January. 'He gave me a very melancholy account of Charles Lamb, which looks like the approach of the catastrophe which everyone must fear. His anti-social feeling is quite a disease.' But Robinson's call on the Lambs in March revealed Charles enjoying a brief respite — 'quiet and cheerful'. A month later his report shows the disease at work again. Mary Lamb withdrew from the house and retired to the care of a keeper at Edmonton. Left with Emma, Lamb visited London for a couple of days in her company. While there he slept at the Talfourds' with his clothes on and behaved, says Robinson, with 'half-crazy irregularity'. The summer passed without bringing him any relief. Lamb described himself as 'frantic'.

What may be viewed as the climax of his condition came at Christmas. A murder took place in quiet Enfield. A man was killed in his bed at the Crown and Horseshoe, the inn where Robinson and Lamb's other guests sometimes spent the night and whence Lamb fetched his own frequent draughts of ale and porter. Lamb wrote to a friend that he was suspected of complicity in the murder. Lamb had evidently reached the rim of reality, where a step or two further would bring him into such mental purlieus as those with which his sister had long been acquainted.

But Lamb had his ounce of saving grace, which was lacking in Mary's composition. It was this that had kept him, though always swaying, still on the safe side of sanity. As far back as the middle of his year of mounting troubles, Lamb had perceived the necessity of taking firm steps. He had had a confidential chat with Robinson at midsummer, in which he said that he would like to see Emma Isola '*well married, great as the loss would be to him*'. He had been driven by pain at last to the point of decision. A certain shrewdness of character, often manifested by Lamb in extreme crises, is seen in his action. Robinson had an eligible nephew who lived in Bury and was already a good friend of Emma's. If anyone doubts that Lamb had any such undignified aims as match-making, he has only to turn to his letter of a slightly later date urging



JAMES GILLMAN

Friend and physician of Coleridge



MRS. ANN GILLMAN  
Friend and nurse of Coleridge

young Robinson to visit Enfield. The young man did not come.

All the while the answer lay close at hand. While Emma Isola had been dividing her time between the Lambs and her boarding-school, Edward Moxon had been continuing as the faithful friend and visitor of the household. It was natural that the two younger persons should be drawn somewhat closely together. To what extent this had developed before Lamb girded himself for heroic measures can only be guessed. But it is likely that matters had already reached a point which Lamb did not wish to acknowledge. That would mean a finality for which he was not yet ready.

The inevitable came at last. Edward Moxon spoke to Lamb definitely in March 1833. Lamb seems to have consented immediately and to have done the generous thing by Emma by transferring to her at once some stock that he owned. But the two men kept the agreement a secret between them—or Lamb thought that they did. 'Mary and Emma do not dream of anything we have discussed', he wrote Emma, however, was naturally aware of her own engagement. Only Mary Lamb was still left entirely out of the secret.

Lamb presents a half-comic, half-pathetic picture of a fussy maiden aunt at a vicarious wedding. He busied himself with trifles, writing letters, fetching guests and entertaining them, and running his thin legs off in a hundred feminine errands. At the ceremony, which took place on the 30th of July 1833, in London, he attained the dignity of giving away the bride. One can read between the lines of his jesting account that he behaved with the utmost decorum and propriety. The lonely, black-clad manikin, standing so strenuously still and acting the unique part of paterfamilias, had well earned whatever honours came to him that day. The wedding trip to Paris, the trousseau gowns of real silk, the cherished portrait of John Milton, had all been lavished upon Emma.

Charles Lamb was celebrating the last and finest victory of his uphill life. No matter how much Emma Isola may have wished the marriage, nor how much Moxon may have wished it, the union had been facilitated by Lamb's generous help. He did not make the sacrifice without any notion of love, as had been the case when he gave up the shadowy image of Ann Simmons in his youth. He knew what he was losing, but

realized the necessity of the sacrifice. Stumbling and trembling visibly as he left the church, stammering his witty nonsense at the wedding feast, he stands out in one of his last fine appearances as the inimitable Charles Lamb. He arrived at home that night perfectly sober

## 8

Mary Lamb's history during Lamb's crucial period is a separate chronicle. By the end of April 1833 the domestic harmony of the Lambs and the Westwoods felt the strain of the secret engagement. The breaking-point came when an epidemic of influenza swept the whole household, turning the place into a hospital. Lamb and his sister had contributed a good deal of illness in the past, but he did not like it when the Westwoods availed themselves of the same privilege. A little grandson of theirs, also sick, disturbed his sleep by coughing. He was removed, but Charles still remembered him. 'The little bastard is gone', he thankfully informed Moxon.

All this strengthened Lamb's dislike so much that he hurriedly left his host. He moved into Mary's private asylum at Edmonton and arranged to have the proprietor make an exclusive home for himself and his sister. It looks like a desperate step. The only way in which it can be made to look at all reasonable is to suppose that Lamb was seeking to imitate Coleridge's solution of his opium problem. But there was no real similarity. The relation between Coleridge and Gillman was one of personal friendship, a mutual bond. Lamb, however, may have believed that he could purchase a corresponding devotion.

It is sometimes said that Mary was hastily transferred to Mr. Walden's because of a mental attack. This is not accurate. When Lamb decreed the change to Edmonton, Mary was in whole health. The removal took place because he was out of patience with the Westwoods and out of patience with himself. In the midst of renouncing his Emma, his long-standing pattern obliged him to throw out the baby with the bath-water. One desperate act compelled its repetition in the form of another.

It was from the Waldens' gloomy hostelry that Lamb and Emma Isola went forth on Emma's wedding morn. The Lambs could no longer boast any other home; and Emma, after a short

stay in London, had returned to their shelter. To make the house still more lugubrious that morning, Mary Lamb's ravings could be heard throughout the premises. For Mary had succumbed to one of her worst spells shortly after her arrival.

On the wedding day, therefore, Mr and Mrs. Walden were kept at home to care for her. This is the picture of Mary as it survives from the morning. The picture that survives from the evening of the same day is a startling contrast. When Lamb came home from the city, Mary was ready to welcome him, entirely sound and whole again.

What had happened in the interlude can best be narrated by quoting Mary's letter to the newly married couple.

My dear Emma and Edward Moxon [she wrote].

Accept my sincere congratulations, and imagine more good wishes than my weak nerves will let me put into good set words. The dreary blank of *unanswered questions* which I ventured to ask in vain was cleared up on the wedding-day by Mrs. Walden taking a glass of wine, and, with a total change of countenance, begged leave to drink Mr and Mrs Moxon's health. *It restored me, from that moment, as if by an electrical stroke, to the entire possession of my senses*. I never felt so calm and quiet after a similar illness as I do now. I feel as if all tears were wiped from my eyes, and all care from my heart.

Mary Lamb

A more revealing glimpse of Mary's motivation could hardly be asked for. Its full explanation can only be given by specialists; but ordinary intelligence can read between the lines an indubitable confession of her great relief. One might go further and inquire if jealousy had on this occasion driven Mary Lamb into the extremity of mania, might not the same passion previously have had the same effect? Is it not fair to wonder whether, in that far-distant, bygone day when Mary Lamb had stabbed her mother, jealousy may not have guided the knife? All in all, one can but regard with amazement the risks that Emma Isola so nonchalantly took in this woman's environment. That the girl, always selfish and inconsiderate of Mary, escaped scot-free is proof that Mary had acquired through the years a kind of self-control, although it was the kind of self-control that drove her again and again into mania.

That the love of Charles and Mary Lamb for each other, salvaging and creative though it was in many ways, contained a morally forbidden element is most likely. The theory has

been set forth at length in an earlier chapter. That Mary could sink to such tortured depths under the force of jealousy lends colour and substance to the theory. The love which could not be admitted to consciousness was bound up with a jealousy which had also to be suppressed. The complete *naïveté* of her own mind is exhibited in her letter to the Moxons. The story she tells says nothing to her consciousness. For this obtuseness she was condemned to spend days, weeks, and months of her life in Cimmerian darkness and solitude.

## CHAPTER X

### *How a Hero Looks*

THE twenty-two-year-old Charles Lamb was one day writing, from his lofty accountant's desk, a letter to his friend Coleridge. 'Did you seize the grand opportunity of seeing Kosciusko while he was at Bristol?' he asked. He then added, with his occasional fine scorn of grammar: 'I never saw a hero; I wonder how they look'

At that particular time Lamb had recently taken over the sole guardianship of his criminally insane sister in order to save her from the gallows. With this experience freshly planted in his mind, he naturally felt a bit cynical about the feats of great public heroes. He knew too well the cost of private uncrowned heroism. Always posing somewhat, however, he found some comfort in affecting to look down on the most glorious name of the day.

Only once in his lifetime did Charles Lamb step out of line to make himself into a hero for a cause. In breaking over the traces this once, he waged a gallant fight and, almost in spite of himself, a winning one. In the battle the little man expanded into a fearless, storming knight of the outraged truth, a genuine hero who might well have shaken hands with the great Kosciusko. Though a lover of the common man, Lamb was too much of a Little Englander to find fault with what was happening in his own country. In many ways he was like Chaucer, the first of the great Cockney poets, who looked on with genial indifference at a people's rebellion surging around him. But unlike Chaucer, Lamb had his day when he yielded to the ferment of revolt within him.

It happened in the year 1823—a year which stands out in many ways as crucial in Lamb's life—that he broke his old habit. He was forty-eight at the time and in the prime of his powers—by no means so weak a prime as his gentle ways and slight physique might suggest. His début and popularity as Elia in the *London Magazine* had given him a new and dramatic



sense of his position. The same year saw the beginning of his growing love for Emma Isola. Literary success and emotional drive combined to make of him an unusually sensitive and daring person

It was Robert Southey who brought him out. From his remote corner on the Lakes, Southey had launched a gratuitous and unexpected attack on Lamb's *Essays of Elia*. One can but suspect that Southey was envious of Lamb's long-postponed but finally definite success. Home from his midsummer holiday, Lamb heard of Southey's *Quarterly* article before he saw it. Not only magazines but also newspapers circulated slowly in those days. Speaking then only from hearsay, Lamb commented, 'I love and respect Southey, and will not retort' But his composure left him when he saw the article The dull and heavy review was none the less devastating insasmuch as it accused the author of the unforgivable offence of the day—lack of proper religious feeling. This was equivalent to a charge of French deism, darker than which nothing was to appear in the world until the spectre of Russian atheism arose. Still Lamb held to his resolve to be silent, glueing himself to his desk and telling himself philosophically: 'I am still something besides being a writer, thank God.'

Mary Lamb had retired to her temporary asylum at Fulham. Lamb was left alone to meditate on his wrong—real this time, as the lapse of time proved He saw the swift decline of his precious *Elia Essays* vindicating his worst fears. If he could have looked into the future and glimpsed his own triumph a hundred years hence he would have believed it a miracle At the moment he saw nothing but total oblivion in sight. Righteous indignation overcame him. The new character of *Elia*, who had come to live within the retiring Charles Lamb, stepped out into the arena to fight.

Lamb wrote his 'Letter to Southey' in a healthy burst of anger. There was nothing paranoid about this incident. Yet, even as he wrote, he still had qualms, half-hoping that the editor of the *London Magazine* might refuse to print it But the *London* had its own feud with Lamb's critics and lacked all motive whatsoever for hauling down a banner so appropriate to its masthead. The October number spread Lamb's polemic—his one and only polemic of a peaceful lifetime—before the public gaze. The 'Letter' went far and wide. It carried Lamb's

defence of the free spirit of man, his tirade against superstition and repression, to multitudes of readers. The deed was done. Charles Lamb had taken his stand once for all on a public tribune.

Since Lamb's death the more respectable and conservative elements of society have steadily insisted on claiming him as their own. He does not belong there. He places himself definitely in his public 'Letter to Southey'. Though the genial temper of the *Essays* never suggests the thrust and stab of his 'Letter', there is nothing in the *Essays* that belies its point of view. In fact, there is nothing in Lamb's life that belies the 'Letter'. Though the eminent Lamb critic E. V. Lucas remarks that it does not show Lamb at his best, it nevertheless shows him as he really was. This is, after all, the only Lamb that is permanently interesting.

It is worth noting that the 'Letter to Southey' runs parallel in many respects to the 'Essay on Needle-Work'. Lamb declared that he wrote the 'Letter' while Mary was staying at Fulham and that she had nothing to do with it. It is just as certain that Lamb had nothing to do with Mary's essay on the needle-workers of London. The two papers form the rare instances of complete separation between the brother and sister. Such high moral adventures require, it seems, to be individual experiences. But it may be that Charles took his stand as a soldier of progress in order to live up to the example of his sister. He tended all along to follow automatically after her example. Things that Mary did, one finds Charles repeating ten or twelve years afterwards; as, for instance, the success of her *Tales* was followed twelve years afterwards by his success as Elia. The time corresponded to the difference in their ages.

So little-known is Lamb's 'Letter' that it is reproduced here with only slight abridgement. Most of the names, which appeared in the original article only as initials, have been supplied. The article deserves interest if only for its collective portrait of Lamb's friends, representing, as he proudly offers, a variety of religious sentiments. It also reflects not Lamb's own style but his flattering esteem for Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, an influence that has survived on down into our day in the writings of an American author as temperamental as Charles Lamb, the late Thomas Wolfe. The 'Letter' stands out above all for the courage and sincerity with which Lamb stood his

ground in the face of what amounted to a religious persecution. He made no retraction, offered no concession, professed no belief that might eliminate Southey's charge against him. The opinions of which Southey had accused him and which he had not expressed in the *Essays* he now set forth clearly and for the first time.

## 2

## ELIA TO ROBERT SOUTHEY, ESQ

Sir. You have done me an unfriendly office, without perhaps much considering what you were doing. You have given an ill name to my poor lucubrations. In a recent paper on *Infidelity*, you usher in a conditional commendation of them with an exception; which, preceding the encomium, and taking up nearly the same space with it, must impress your readers with the notion, that the objectionable parts in them are at least equal in quantity to the pardonable. The censure is in fact the criticism; the praise—a concession merely. Exceptions usually follow, to qualify praise or blame. But there stands your reproof, in the very front of your notice, in ugly characters, like some bugbear, to frighten all good Christians from purchasing. Through you I become an object of suspicion to preceptors of youth, and fathers of families. 'A book which wants only a sounder religious feeling, to be as delightful as it is original.' With no further explanation, what must your readers conjecture, but that my little volume is some vehicle for heresy or infidelity?

The quotation which you honour me by subjoining, oddly enough, is of a character which bespeaks a temperament in the writer the very reverse of *that* your reproof goes to insinuate. Had you been taxing me with superstition, the passage would have been pertinent to the censure. Was it worth your while to go so far out of your way to affront the feelings of an old friend, and commit yourself by an irrelevant quotation, for the pleasure of reflecting upon a poor child, an exile at Genoa?<sup>1</sup>

I am at a loss what particular essay you had in view (if my poor ramblings amount to that appellation) when you were in such a hurry to thrust in your objection, like bad news, foremost. Perhaps the paper on 'Saying Graces' was the obnoxious feature. I have endeavoured there to rescue a voluntary duty—good in place but never as I remember, literally commanded—from the charge of an undecent formality. Rightly taken, sir, that paper was not against Graces, but Want of Grace; not against the ceremony, but the carelessness and slovenliness so often observed in the performance of it.

<sup>1</sup> Thornton Hunt.

Or was it *that* on the 'New Year'—in which I have described the feelings of the merely natural man, on a consideration of the amazing change, which is supposable to take place on our removal from this fleshly scene? If men would honestly confess their misgivings (which few men will) there are times when the strongest Christian of us, I believe, has reeled under questions of such staggering obscurity I do not accuse you of this weakness. There are some who tremblingly reach out shaking hands to the guidance of Faith—others who stoutly venture into the dark (their Human Confidence their leader, whom they mistake for Faith), and, investing themselves beforehand with cherubic wings, as they fancy, find their new robes as familiar and fitting to the supposed growth and stature in godliness, as the cast they left off yesterday—some whose hope totters upon crutches—others who stalk into futurity upon stilts.

The contemplation of a Spiritual World,—which without the addition of a misgiving conscience, is enough to shake some natures to their foundation,—is smoothly got over by others, who shall float over the black billows in their little boat of No-Distrust, as unconcernedly as over a summer sea. The difference is chiefly constitutional.

One man shall love his friends and his friends' faces, and, under the uncertainty of conversing with them again in the same manner and familiar circumstances of sight, speech, etc., as upon earth—in a moment of no irreverent weakness—for a dream-while, no more—would be almost content, for a reward of a life of virtue (if he could ascribe such acceptance to his lame performances), to take up his portion with those he loved and was made to love in this good world, which he knows—which was created so lovely, beyond his deservings. Another, embracing a more exalted vision—so that he might receive indefinite additaments of power, knowledge, beauty, glory, etc.—is ready to forego the recognition of humbler individualities of earth, and the old familiar faces. The shapings of our heavens are the modifications of our constitutions; and Mr. Feeble Mind, or Mr. Great Heart, is born in every one of us.

Some (and such have been accounted the safest divines) have shrunk from pronouncing upon the final state of any man; nor dare they pronounce the case of Judas to be desperate. Others (with stronger optics), as plainly as with the eye of flesh, shall behold a *given king* in bliss, and a *given chamberlain* in torment, even to the eternising of a cast of the eye in the latter, his own self-mocked and good-humouredly-borne deformity on earth, but supposed to aggravate the uncouth and hideous expression of his pangs in the other place. That one man can presume so far, and that another would with shuddering disclaim such confidences, is, I believe, an effect of the nerves purely.

If, in either of these papers, or elsewhere, I have been betrayed into some levities—not affronting the sanctuary, but glancing perhaps at some of the outskirts and extreme edges, the debatable land between the holy and profane regions—(for the admixture of man's inventions, twisting themselves with the name of religion itself has artfully made it difficult to touch even the alloy, without, in some men's estimation, soiling the fine gold)—if I have sported within the purlieus of serious matter—it was, I dare say, a humour—be not startled, sir,—which I have unwittingly derived from yourself.

You have all your life been making a jest of the Devil. Not of the scriptural meaning of that dark essence—personal or allegorical; for the nature is nowhere plainly delivered. I acquit you of intentional irreverence. But indeed you have made wonderfully free with, and been mighty pleasant upon, the popular idea and attributes of him. A Noble Lord, your brother Visionary,<sup>1</sup> has scarcely taken greater liberties with the material keys, and merely Catholic notion of St. Peter. You have flattered him in prose; you have chanted him in goodly odes. You have been his Jester; volunteer Laureate, and self-elected Court Poet to Beelzebub.

You have never ridiculed, I believe, what you thought to be religion, but you are always girding at what some pious, but perhaps mistaken, folks think to be so. For this reason, I am sorry to hear that you are engaged upon a life of George Fox. I know you will fall into the error of intermixing some comic stuff with your seriousness. The Quakers tremble at the subject in your hands. The Methodists are as shy of you, upon account of *their* founder.

But, above all, our Popish brethren are most in your debt. The errors of that Church have proved a fruitful source to your scoffing vein. Their Legend has been a Golden one to you. And here your friends, sir, have noticed a notable inconsistency. To the imposing rites, the solemn penances, devout austerities of that communion; the affecting though erring piety of their hermits; the silence and solitude of the Chartreux—their crossings, their holy waters, their Virgin, and their saints—to these, they say, you have been indebted for the best feelings, and the richest imagery, of your epic poetry. You have drawn copious drafts upon Loretto.

We thought at one time you were going post to Rome but that in the facetious commentaries, which it is your custom to append so plentifully, and (some say) injudiciously, to your loftiest performances in this kind, you spurn the uplifted toe, which you but just now seemed to court; leave his holiness in the lurch; and show him a fair pair of Protestant heels under your Romish vestment. When we

<sup>1</sup> Byron.

think you already at the wicket, suddenly a violent cross wind blows you transverse—

*Ten thousand leagues awry. . .  
 . Then might we see  
 Cows, hoods and habits, with their wearers, tost  
 And flutter'd into rage; then reliques, beads,  
 Indulgences, dispenses, pardons, bulls,  
 The sport of winds.*

You pick up pence by showing the hallowed bones, shrine, and crucifix, and you take money a second time by exposing the trick of them afterwards. You carry your verse to Castle Angelo for sale in a morning, and, swifter than a pedlar can transmute his pack, you are at Canterbury with your prose ware before night.

Sir, is it that I dislike you in this merry vein? The very reverse. No countenance becomes an intelligent jest better than your own. It is your grave aspect, when you look awful upon your poor friends, which I would deprecate.

In more than one place, if I mistake not, you have been pleased to compliment me at the expense of my companions. I cannot accept your compliment at such a price. The upbraiding a man's poverty naturally makes him look about him to see whether he be so poor indeed as he is presumed to be. You have put me upon counting my riches. Really, Sir, I did not know I was so wealthy in the article of friendships. There is —, and —, whom you never heard of, but exemplary characters both, and excellent church-goers; and Norris, mine and my father's friend for nearly half a century; and the enthusiast for Wordsworth's poetry, Thomas N. Talfourd, a little tainted with Socinianism, it is to be feared, but constant in his attachments, and a capital critic; and —, a sturdy old Athanasian, so that sets all to rights again, and Wainwright, the light, and warm-as-light-hearted Janus of the LONDON, and the translator of Dante, still a curate, modest and amiable Cary, and Allan Cunningham, the large-hearted Scot; and Procter, candid and affectionate as his own poetry; and Allsop, Coleridge's friend; and Gillman, his more than friend; and Coleridge himself, the same to me still, as in those old evenings, when we used to sit and speculate (do you remember them, Sir?) at our old Salutation tavern, upon Pantisocracy and golden days to come on earth; and Wordsworth (why, sir, I might drop my rent-roll here, such goodly farms and manors have I reckoned up already).

In what possession has not this last name alone estated me? But I will go on; and Monkhouse, the noble-minded kinsman, by wedlock, of Wordsworth; and Henry Crabb Robinson, unwearied in the offices of a friend; and Clarkson, almost above the narrowness of that

relation, yet condescending not seldom heretofore from the labours of his world-embracing charity to bless my humble roof; and the gall-less and single-minded Dyer; and the high-minded associate of Cook, the veteran Colonel, with his lusty heart still sending cartels of defiance to old time; and, not least, William Ayrton, the last and steadiest left to me of that little knot of whist-players, that used to assemble weekly, for so many years, at the Queen's Gate (you remember them, Sir?) and called Admiral Burney friend

I will come to the point at once. I believe you will not make many exceptions to my associates so far. But I have purposely omitted some intimacies, which I do not yet repent of having contracted, with two gentlemen diametrically opposed to yourself in principles. You will understand me to allude to the authors of 'Rimini' [Leigh Hunt] and of the 'Table Talk' [William Hazlitt]. And first of the former

It is an error more particularly incident to persons of the correctest principles and habits, to seclude themselves from the rest of mankind as from another species, and form into knots and clubs. The best people, herding thus exclusively, are in danger of contracting a narrowness. Heat and cold, dryness and moisture, in the natural world do not fly asunder, to split the globe into sectarian parts and separations; but mingling, as they best may, correct the malignity of any single predominance.

The analogy holds, I suppose, in the moral world. If all the good people were to ship themselves off to Terra Incognita, what, in humanity's name, is to become of the refuse? If the persons, whom I have chiefly in view, have not pushed matters to this extremity yet, they carry them as far as they can go. Instead of mixing with the infidel and the freethinker—in the room of opening a negotiation, to try at last to find out at which gate the error entered—they huddle close together, in a weak fear of infection, like that pusillanimous underling in Spenser—

*This is the wandering wood, this Error's den;  
A monster vile, whom God and man does hate:  
Therefore, I rede, beware. 'Fly, fly,' quoth then  
The fearful Dwarf.*

And, if they be writers in orthodox journals, addressing themselves only to the irritable passions of the unbeliever, they proceed in a safe system of strengthening the strong hands, and confirming the valiant knees; of converting the already converted, and proselyting their own party. I am the more convinced of this from a passage in the very Treatise which occasioned this letter. It is where, having recommended to the doubter the writings of Michaelis and Lardner,

you ride triumphantly over the necks of all infidels, sceptics, and dissenters, from this time to the world's end, upon the wheels of two unanswerable deductions. . . . When you sit down to pen theology, you do not at all consider your opponents, but have in your eye, merely and exclusively, readers of the same way of thinking with yourself, and therefore have no occasion to trouble yourself with the quality of the logic to which you treat them.

Neither can I think, if you had had the welfare of the poor child—over whose hopeless condition you whine so lamentably and (I must think) unseasonably—seriously at heart, that you could have taken the step of sticking him up by *name*—T. H., is as good as *naming* him—to perpetuate an outrage upon the parental feelings, as long as the QUARTERLY REVIEW shall last. Was it necessary to specify an individual case, and give to Christian compassion the appearance of a personal attack? Is this the way to conciliate unbelievers, or not rather to widen the breach irreparably?

I own I could never think so considerably of myself as to decline the society of an agreeable or worthy man upon difference of opinion only. The impediments and the facilitations to a sound belief are various and inscrutable as the heart of man. Some believe upon weak principles; others cannot feel the efficacy of the strongest. One of the most candid, most upright, and single-meaning men I ever knew, was the late Thomas Holcroft. I believe he never said one thing, and meant another, in his life, and, as near as I can guess, he never acted otherwise than with the most scrupulous attention to conscience. Ought we to wish the character false, for the sake of a hollow compliment to Christianity?

Accident introduced me to the acquaintance of Mr Leigh Hunt and the experience of his many friendly qualities confirmed a friendship between us. You who have been misrepresented yourself, I should hope, have not lent an idle ear to the calumnies which have been spread abroad respecting this gentleman. I was admitted to his household for some years, and do most solemnly aver that I believe him to be in his domestic relations as correct as any man. He chose an ill-judged subject for a poem, the peccant humours of which have been visited on him tenfold by the artful use, which his adversaries have made, of an *equivocal term*. The subject itself was started by Dante, but better because briefer treated of. But the crime of the lovers, in the Italian and the English poet, with its aggravated enormity of circumstance is not of a kind (as the critics of the latter well knew) with those conjunctions, for which Nature herself has provided no excuse, because no temptation. It has nothing in common with the black horrors, sung by Ford and Massinger. The familiarising of it in the tale and fable may be for that reason incidentally more contagious.



In spite of *Rimini*,<sup>1</sup> I must look upon its author as a man of taste and a poet. He is better than so; he is one of the most cordial-minded men I ever knew, and matchless as a fireside companion. I mean not to affront or wound your feelings when I say that in his more genial moods he has often reminded me of you. There is the same air of mild dogmatism—the same condescending to a boyish sportiveness—in both your conversations. His handwriting is so much the same with your own, that I have opened more than one letter of his, hoping, nay, not doubting, but it was from you, and have been disappointed (he will bear with my saying so) at the discovery of my error.

Leigh Hunt is unfortunate in holding some loose and not very definite speculations (for at times I think he hardly knows whither his premises would carry him) on marriage—the tenets, I conceive, of the 'Political Justice' carried a little further. For anything I could discover in his practice, they have reference, like those, to some future possible condition of society, and not to the present times. But neither for these obliquities of thinking (upon which my own conclusions are as distant as the poles asunder) nor for his political asperities and petulances, which are wearing out with the heats and vanities of youth—did I select him for a friend; but for qualities which fitted him for that relation. I do not know whether I flatter myself with being the occasion, but certain it is, that, touched with some misgivings for sundry harsh things which he had written aforetime against our friend Coleridge, before he left this country, he sought a reconciliation with that gentleman (himself being his own introducer), and found it.

Leigh Hunt is now in Italy, on his departure to which land, with much regret I took my leave of him and his little family—seven of them, Sir, with their mother—and as kind a set of little people (Thornton Hunt and all), as affectionate children as ever blessed a parent. Had you seen them, Sir, I think you could not have looked upon them as so many little Jonases—but rather as pledges of the vessel's safety, that was to bear such a freight of love.

I wish you would read Mr. Hunt's lines to that same Thornton Hunt, 'six years old, during a sickness':

*Sleep breathes at last from out thee,  
My little patient boy —,*

. . . and ask yourself how far they are out of the spirit of Christianity. I have a letter from Italy, received but the other day, into which

<sup>1</sup> Francesca da Rimini, whose story has been told not only by Leigh Hunt but by divers other poets, including Dante and d'Annunzio. That the lovers in the story were sister- and brother-in-law was considered to make the subject taboo. Lamb seems to have looked on the crime as 'beyond Nature'.

Leigh Hunt has put as much heart, and as many friendly yearnings after old associates, and native country, as, I think, paper can well hold. It would do you no hurt to give that perusal also.

From the *other gentleman* I neither expect nor desire (as he is well assured) any such concessions as Leigh Hunt made to Coleridge. What hath soured him, and made him to suspect his friends of infidelity towards him, when there was no such matter, I know not. I stood well with him for fifteen years (the proudest of my life), and have ever spoken my full mind of him to some, to whom his panegyric must naturally be least tasteful. I never in thought swerved from him, I never betrayed him, I never slackened in my admiration of him; I was the same to him (neither better nor worse), though he could not see it, as in the days when he thought fit to trust me.

At this instant he may be preparing for me some compliment, above my deserts, as he has sprinkled many such among his admirable books, for which I rest his debtor; or, for anything I know, or can guess to the contrary, he may be about to read a lecture on my weaknesses. He is welcome to them (as he was to my humble hearth), if they can divert a spleen, or ventilate a fit of sullenness. I wish he would not quarrel with the world at the rate he does, but the reconciliation must be effected by himself, and I despair of living to see that day. But protesting against much that he has written, and some things which he chooses to do, judging him by his conversation which I enjoyed so long, and relished so deeply; or by his books, in those places where no clouding passion intervenes—I should belie my own conscience, if I said less, than that I think William Hazlitt to be, in his natural and healthy state, one of the wisest and finest spirits breathing. So far from being ashamed of that intimacy, which was betwixt us, it is my boast that I was able for so many years to have preserved it entire; and I think I shall go to my grave without finding or expecting to find, such another companion.<sup>1</sup> But I forget my manners—you will pardon me, Sir,—I return to the correspondence.

Sir, you were pleased (you know where) to invite me to a compliance with the wholesome forms and doctrines at the Church of England. I take your advice with as much kindness as it was meant. But I must think the invitation rather more kind than seasonable. I am a Dissenter. The last sect, with which you can remember me to have made common profession, were the Unitarians. You would think it not very pertinent, if (fearing that all was not well with you) I were gravely to invite you (for a remedy) to attend with me a course of Mr. Belsham's Lectures at Hackney. Perhaps I have scruples to some of your forms and doctrines. But if I come, am I secure of civil treatment?

<sup>1</sup> It was this paragraph that brought Hazlitt back to Lamb's fireside, to sue for a renewal of the friendship, which lasted to Hazlitt's death.

The last time I was in any of your places of worship was on Easter Sunday last. I had the satisfaction of listening to a very sensible sermon of an argumentative turn, delivered with great propriety by one of your bishops. The place was Westminster Abbey. As such religion as I have, has always acted on me more by way of sentiment than argumentative process, I was not unwilling, after the sermon ended, by no unbecoming transition, to pass over to some serious feelings, impossible to be disconnected from the sight of those old tombs, etc. But, by whose order I know not, I was debarred that privilege even for so short a space as a few minutes; and turned, like a dog, or some profane person, out into the common street, with feelings, which I could not help, but not very congenial to the day or discourse. I do not know that I shall ever venture myself again into one of your churches.

You had your education at Westminster; and doubtless among those dim aisles and cloisters, you must have gathered much of that devotional feeling in those young years, on which your purest mind feeds still and may it feed. The antiquarian spirit, strong in you, and gracefully blending ever with the religious, may have been sown in you among those wrecks of splendid mortality. You owe it to the place of your education; and owe it to your learned fondness for the architecture of your ancestors; you owe it to the venerableness of your ecclesiastical establishment, which is daily lessened and called in question through these practices—to speak aloud your sense of them; never to desist raising your voice against them, till they be totally done away with and abolished; till the doors of Westminster Abbey be no longer closed against the decent, though low-in-purse enthusiast, or blameless devotee, who must commit an injury against his family economy, if he would be indulged with a bare admission within its walls.

You owe it to the decencies, which you wish to see maintained in its impressive services that our Cathedral be no longer an object of inspection to the poor at those times only, in which they must rob from their attendance on the worship every minute which they can bestow upon the Fabric. In vain the public prints have taken up this subject, in vain such poor nameless writers as myself express their indignation. A word from you, Sir—a hint in your Journal—would be sufficient to fling open the doors of the beautiful Temple again, as we can remember them when we were boys.

At that time of life, what would the imaginative faculty (such as it is) in both of us, have suffered, if the entrance to so much reflection had been obstructed by the demand of so much silver. If we had scraped it up to gain an occasional admission (as we certainly should have done) would the sight of those old tombs have been as impressive to us (while we had been weighing anxiously prudence against

sentiment) as when the gates stood open, as those of the adjacent Park; when we could walk in at any time, as the mood brought us, for a shorter or a longer time, as that lasted? Is the being shown over a place the same as silently for ourselves detecting the genius of it? In no part of our beloved Abbey now can a person find entrance (out of service time) under the sum of *two shillings*. The rich and the great will smile at the anticlimax, presumed to lie in those two short words. But you can tell them, Sir, how much quiet worth, how much capacity for enlarged feeling, how much taste and genius, may coexist, especially in youth, with a purse incompetent to this demand.

A respected friend of ours, during his late visit to the metropolis, presented himself for admission to Saint Paul's. At the same time a decently clothed man, with as decent a wife, and child, were bargaining for the same indulgence. The price was only two-pence each person. The poor but decent man hesitated, desirous to go in; but there were three of them, and he turned away reluctantly. Perhaps he wished to have seen the tomb of Nelson. Perhaps the interior of the Cathedral was his object. But in the state of his finances, even six-pence might reasonably seem too much. Tell the Aristocracy of the country (no man can do it more impressively), instruct them of what value these insignificant pieces of money, these minims to their sight, may be to their humbled brethren. Shame these Sellers out of the Temple. Show the poor that you can sometimes think of them in some other light than as mutineers and malcontents. Conciliate them by such kind methods to their superiors, civil and ecclesiastical. Stop the mouths of the railers, and suffer your old friends, upon the old terms, again to honour and admire you.

Stifle not the suggestions of your better nature with the pretext, that an indiscriminate admission would expose the Tombs to violation. Remember your boy days. Did you ever see or hear of a mob in the Abbey, while it was free to all? Did the rabble come there, or trouble their heads about such speculations? It is all that you can do to drive them into your churches, they do not voluntarily offer themselves. They have, alas! no passion for antiquities; for tomb of king or prelate, sage or poet. If they had, they would be no longer the rabble.

For forty years that I have known the Fabric, the only well-attested charge of violation adduced, has been a ridiculous dismemberment committed upon the effigy of that amiable spy, Major André. And is it for this—the wanton mischief of some schoolboy, fired perhaps with raw notions of Transatlantic Freedom—or the remote possibility of such a mischief occurring again, as easily to be prevented by stationing a constable within the walls, if the vergers are incompetent to the duty—is it upon such wretched pretences, that the people of England are made to pay a new Peter's Pence, so long abrogated,

or must content themselves with contemplating the ragged Exterior of their Cathedral? The mischief was done about the time that you were a scholar there. Do you know anything about the unfortunate relic? Can you help us in this emergency to find the nose? Or can you give Chantrey a notion (from memory) of its pristine life and vigour? I am willing for peace's sake to subscribe my guinea towards the restoration of the lamented feature.—I am, Sir, Your humble Servant,

Elia

3

Lamb's extremely personal document raised a storm of literary excitement. Crabb Robinson, who esteemed no other kind of excitement, except a public hanging, so worthy of attention, wrote pleasantly about it in his diary. It formed the chief topic of comment in the coffee-shops and in the editorial columns. Nor did the trend of public opinion take a tone unfavourable to Lamb. *The Times* came out strongly on his side. The fact that Southey was Poet Laureate and Lamb a clerk in India House did not affect the balance of public sympathy. When the mild-tempered, retiring, and only slightly mischievous Elia resorted so suddenly to angry words, many people simply concluded that he had been sufficiently provoked. In short, Lamb received a more hearty response from his contemporaries than later generations credited. It was an episode in which the fundamental democracy of the English public asserted itself.

Southey made no public reply. His state of mind was probably best described by Robinson's brief diary entry: 'Southey must feel it.' But he did write a private and conciliatory note to Lamb, heaping coals of fire where they were most likely to take effect. Lamb at once regretted his assault, smiting his breast and bewailing his fault fantastically, but only in private letters. None of this affected the record. For better or worse, Lamb's proud defence of himself and his friends was destined to stand as written. His attack on Southey was also spread out indelibly on the pages of English literature. It exerted its influence on the ultimate opinion of the poet. Dating from then, critics have often and frequently dared to speak of Robert Southey's Pharisaic and self-righteous character.

Lamb's 'Letter' had a quality for which the *Times* editorial

writer aptly chose the word 'curious': 'The . . . *London Magazine* contains a curious letter from Elia to Mr Southey.' Mary Lamb's 'Essay on Needle-Work' was in the same sense *curious*. But her subject, the problems of labour, had so little popular appeal that her amazing knowledge had gone without notice. Charles's polemic dealt with eighteenth-century concepts—truth, conscience, and religion—and spoke for that reason a more intelligible language.

A further curious feature of his contribution was the motive that prompted it. This, even from the first, seemed to challenge an explanation. Lamb's earliest biographer, Talfourd, ventured the following theory: 'It might indeed have been predicted of Lamb, that if ever he did enter the arena of personal controversy, it would be with one who had obtained a place in his affections; for no motive less powerful than the resentment of friendship which deemed itself wounded could place him in a situation so abhorrent to his habitual thoughts.'

This would sound more convincing if Lamb and Southey had ever been really on a footing of friendship. Theirs had been merely a literary bond, however, developing out of Lamb's imagination rather than out of his heart. Southey might have wounded his vanity, but he could not have betrayed a deep-lying trust or profound attachment. The personal injury that Talfourd hypothesized could not have been intense; at least, not intense enough to throw him so spectacularly out of his customary grooves of behaviour.

But it does seem within the character of Lamb as we know him to be stung into action by a religious argument. In his childhood home the atmosphere surrounding his mother and his aunt had been strongly coloured by this particular theme. His aunt, supposedly a Roman Catholic, had represented the opposition to the Established Church of England, which had been impersonated in turn by his mother. Charles Lamb had chosen, for probably good infantile reasons, to follow his aunt rather than his mother. In his attack on Southey he showed a fine heat and a valiant self-assurance such as Aunt Sarah must have showed in hundreds of similar arguments in his presence. This memory is more likely to have been his unconscious motive than any deep emotional hurt inflicted by Southey. After his one outburst of evangelism he never again returned to the subject.

The 'Letter' was one of the most individual acts of Charles Lamb's life, though he did not seem to realize it. Living in retirement at Islington, he did nothing to follow up the victory he had gained. On rare occasions he continued to send out another Essay by Elia. But his mood of aggressive action had come and gone like the wind.

## CHAPTER XI

### *Asylum*

IT is unfortunate that those who wrote their impressions of Mary and Charles Lamb in old age were not better acquainted with the pair. Most of these last-minute portraits derive from persons who were seeing them for the first time. Charles's erratic flights had taken him out of reach of all but a few old friends who had known him in youth and middle age. To new observers, Mary and Charles Lamb existed mainly as a legend—a symbol of themselves rather than the living persons they still contrived to be.

Such a hasty, eleventh-hour vignette came from the pen of Thomas Carlyle. The Scotchman had descended upon London, armed with a large, fresh, unbroken prejudice against the products of the city. To the lasting detriment of his reputation, he brought this prejudice freely to bear upon London's Charles Lamb. 'I have seen Lamb', he wrote. 'A more pitiful, rickety, gasping, staggering Tomfool I do not know. . . . His speech wriggles hither and thither with an incessant painful fluctuation; not an opinion in it, or a fact, or a phrase that you can thank him for. . . . Besides, he is now a confirmed, shameless drunkard; *asks* vehemently for gin and water in strangers' houses, tipples till he is utterly mad, and is only not thrown out of doors because he is too much despised for taking such trouble with him.'

One would hesitate to quote the boorish remarks of Carlyle were they less well known. In spite of their injustice and prejudice, they have been quoted more widely than other and more reasonable criticisms. Carlyle's outburst is not hard to explain. The peasant in him reacted thus to the essentially city-bred Charles Lamb; the Puritan in him abhorred the Pagan in Lamb. The simplest explanation is that Carlyle felt in general like this about a number of people and only allowed himself to express it about one whom for divers reasons he regarded as an easy victim.



Another author, Walter Savage Landor, who gazed on Lamb in passing recorded the contrary opinion. Their meeting marked an occasion when Charles and Mary were specifically placed on review. The visit, as arranged by Henry Crabb Robinson, was deadly formal. But to judge by Landor's enthusiasm, he did not feel the chill. 'Lamb did not think it worth while to put on a fine new coat to come down and see me in,' said Landor. 'He met me as if I had been a friend of twenty years' standing.' An hour affords a short space of time, as measured by the drawing-room tempo of that day, in which to gain a true impression; but that was all the time that Landor had with the Lambs at Enfield.

But between him and the Lambs strong ties of sympathy already existed. They had previously met in the most important area of their lives—in their writings. Lamb had used for his solace, when he was first facing the loss of Emma Isola, a poem of Landor's, having found in it apparently the perfect expression of his mood. 'Both tipsy and sober,' said Robinson, 'he is ever muttering *Rose Aylmer*.' Landor had plucked for him the willow that he wore in his grief.

Landor cherished a warm admiration for the works of both Charles and Mary. Of Mary's story 'The Father's Wedding Day' he wrote: 'With the sole exception of the *Bride of Lammermoor*, it is the most beautiful tale in prose composition in any language, ancient or modern.' And of Charles's works he wrote with the same unrestrained enthusiasm: 'The world will never see again two such delightful volumes as *The Essays of Elia*.' Upon a literary sympathy of such strength the mere physical meeting of the authors would make but a negligible impression. The passage of a hurried hour did not affect the opinion they already held of each other.

Less distinguished visitors who went to see the Lambs in their old age went as pilgrims. The impression that they carried away had little to do with the reality.

## 2

The house called Bay Cottage in Edmonton, into which Lamb and his sister had hastily retired in 1833, looked dolefully like what it was—a private asylum. Standing behind a narrow garden and deeply shaded by tall houses, it had none of the

cheerful openness of the Westwood house on the green. It slept in a permanent twilight like the shut-in world of the Temple.

Entering the hall and passing a tall clock, one turned directly on the right into the Lambs' sitting-room. The Hogarths on the walls, the bookcases filled with motley books, and the many magazines lying about marked the chamber as belonging to its occupants. This study and living-room was destined to be Charles Lamb's last on earth.

At the end of the vine-hung walk and directly facing the gate stood an ancient Charity School. Over the entrance was placed a blue statue representing an orphan. It must have stirred in Lamb's bosom reminiscences of Christ's Hospital and his own blue-clad boyhood. The only discrepancy was the sex of the statue, for the orphan over the door was a girl. This need not have disturbed Lamb's backward-turning fancies too much. The small boy of seven, gowned for Christ's Hospital, had not been a very masculine child. He had been nursed too closely by his aunt and his sister to develop manly traits.

Marching down the garden walk on a May morning, Lamb presented a peculiar and original figure to the curious eyes of observers. As the Lambs had become more apart in their lives, they had become more apart in their looks. Charles still clung to his knee-breeches and gaiters. He carried a cane, though less to support his lameness than to play about with. His mobile lips were usually closed over a long clay pipe. One can hardly imagine him without a book under his arm. His shrunken figure had become still more shrunken in his latter years, so that his clothes hung loosely from his body. Mrs. Randal Norris's son-in-law, when out walking with Lamb, would put his hands under his arms and lift him over a fence like a child.

Mary Lamb emerged from her retirement but seldom. When she did she appeared to most people about the same age as her brother. But while Charles had become shrunken with age, she had grown, in Dorothy Wordsworth's phrase, 'sadly fat'. 'And she dresses so loose', Miss Wordsworth critically added, 'that she looks the worse for it.' Other women friends, notably Mary Cowden Clarke, described Mary as dressing quite neatly. Of this there may be just a little doubt, for Mary, like her brother Charles, was usually strewn with black rappee. Her

regular attire was a plain dark gown—Mary Cowden Clarke says it was silk, but Charles's letters speak only of stuff—with a white kerchief crossed over her bosom, and her unchanging bonnet.

Mary's smile was exactly like her brother's, a heart-warming episode in each. She had also developed with the passage of time an imitation of Charles's stammer. She walked, too, with the same uncertain gait that rickets had fastened upon Charles for life. Short and bent of shoulder, the brother and sister resembled a pair of ancient statuettes. They had seemingly regressed to the British folk who inhabited Lincolnshire before the English took over England. The antiquity of their appearance seemed rooted in the antiquity of their tastes and interests.

The only realistic portrait of Charles and Mary in existence was painted at this time. It was the work of Francis Stephen Cary, a son of the Cary who translated Dante's *Inferno*. Lamb had met the elder Cary, as he had met so many of his friends, through the mediation of Coleridge. An accidental encounter at a seaside resort had precipitated in Coleridge one of those sudden friendships to which he was so vulnerable. He had then passed on his enthusiasm, as he usually did, to the more stable enjoyment of Lamb. Lamb instantly liked Cary, whom he learned to know better as an official in the British Museum. Soon Charles and Mary had a regular monthly dinner engagement with the Cary family in their home in the Museum.

It was after one of Cary's dinner parties that Lamb wrote a bacchanal that ranks as one of his very best performances in this line. Strange things have happened in the British Museum; but to have furnished the background for Charles Lamb's drunkenness is not the least memorable of them. Lamb was fifty-nine; within another two months he was destined to lay down the last burden of his much burdened life. But at Cary's dinner-table he drank too much, and he had to be taken home unconscious in a hackney-coach.

'By whom was I divested?' he wrote to Cary the next morning. 'Burning blushes! not by the fair hands of nymphs, the Buffam Graces? [He lodged with the Misses Buffam.] Remote whispers suggested that . . . a young Mentor accompanied a reprobate old Telemachus; that, Trojan like, he bore his charge upon his shoulders, while the wretched incubus, in glimmering senses, hiccuped drunken snatches of flying on the bats' wings

after sunset. . . . Occasion led me through Great Russell Street yesterday I gazed at the great knocker. My feeble hands in vain essayed to lift it I dreaded that Argus Portitor, who doubtless lanterned me out on that prodigious night. I called the Elgin marbles. They were cold to my suit. I shall never again, I said . . . say without fear of thrusting back . . . "I am going to Mr. Cary's". . . . I am devited to come on Wednesdays?'

The dinner engagements with Cary continued as long as Lamb lived. But his dissolution under the strains of existence was fast taking place Under Crabb Robinson's ghoulisn eyes, Lamb had been visibly breaking up for a number of years The eleventh-hour friendship with Cary turned out to be the last real irradiating experience of his life.

Out of this warm friendship grew the fine portrait of the Lambs. The younger Cary undertook it at the request of his father, who saw in the couple a theme that might have inspired the creator of the *Divine Comedy* An unusual comprehension guided the young man's hand in his technically faulty but highly eloquent portrait The work was clearly a labour of love and it bore the usual fine earmarks of such undertakings. It is a better likeness of Lamb than Hazlitt's *Venetian Senator* or Henry Meyer's histrionic *India House Gentleman* By contrast with these, Cary's work is refreshingly devoid of fantastic or pre-tentious features. In sober English style he portrayed a pair of honest, elderly, homespun persons entering the last shadowed walk of life together. By the absence of all suggestion of drama he achieved the essence of their drama

In his picture their faces wear the composed expression one might scarcely expect from their strange histories No high melancholy sits upon their brows; nor yet is the humour which lurked below the surface, and which supported their characters, at all visible. A serious expression, a look—earthly yet ethereal, sorrowful yet sensible, pixyish yet ordinary—reposes on their countenances. Some common clay-ballast in their total composition enabled them to keep their looks as usual quiet. The atmosphere of the studio sittings, which were literally the last act of their well-bred social lives, is reflected in the countenances.

Lamb and Mary sat by turns in Cary's Bloomsbury studio on the mornings after the dinner parties. Charles must have looked *not* his best on some of these mornings. To young Cary's

enterprising idea that the sister should be included in the painting we owe our only likeness of her. Portraits were naturally rare in those days, except portraits of the rich and the great; and the democratic daguerreotype had not yet made its appearance. Only ladies of quality could afford to be painted by the artists of the day.

Without the rare acumen of this artist we should have no conception whatever of Mary Lamb's appearance. Cary's foresight is comparable to that of Sarah Hazlitt, who preserved all of Mary Lamb's letters. Except for those two accidental persons in her environment, the author of the *Tales from Shakespeare* would have been only a lost memory, a blank to the eye and the mind.

Cary's work was never finished. The curtain fell suddenly on the sixty-year-old drama with the painter still holding the brush in his hand. He firmly refused to touch the canvas afterwards. He had projected it as a study from life, he said, and as such he wished it to remain. Doubtless he was right in his decision. The painting is in the National Portrait Gallery, where, together with many other portraits out of England's past, some of them equally faulty, it epitomizes a chapter of history.

One final note concerning Mary Lamb's flesh-and-blood existence might be added. Little Ann Rickman, daughter of the first English census-taker, remembered after she had grown up that Mary Lamb had a pleasant smile and a rather 'gruff kind of voice'. Ann Rickman remembered too that she was 'a roundabout little body, with . . . a layer of snuff on her upper lip—and so good-natured'. It adds a harmonious touch to our picture of Mary in her old age to know that she had an alto voice issuing from a frilly mob-cap in the form of brief but always pleasant remarks; and that it was as usual on a child that she made a lasting impression.

## 3

The long line of lecturing Englishmen who were to be seen and heard in America soon after the Civil War had already begun to form at home. William Hazlitt, certainly ill qualified enough for the career, had undertaken—not wholly unsuccessfully—a series of talks at the Russell Institution. Thomas Carlyle, equally little qualified, tried out his talent on his own

countrymen. Of them all, Coleridge, who perhaps set the first fatal example, was by nature the best endowed for the task. He was also the most successful at it.

Coleridge began his lecturing early and continued at it long after he went into retirement at Gillman's. He conducted his talks in a commercial way, hiring a hall and selling his transcendental wares like any other vendor. But here the mundane and the practical in Coleridge's lectures ended. Once on the platform, he discoursed like no other known speaker or lecturer. He held forth with the eloquence of one in a trance or obsession. On one famous occasion, challenged by an impromptu subject, he spoke without stopping for an hour and a half—and would have continued indefinitely had not his friend Gillman trod on his foot to bring him to earth again.

The relation between Coleridge and Gillman had in it something both sublime and ridiculous. Life tends to offer these small anomalies in important and genius-burdened people; with Coleridge the item was strictly in character. We have seen Coleridge in his impulsive entrance into the Gillman aura. Charles and Mary Lamb presided over his step, but in a sceptical sort of way. They were not prepared for the strange direction things were to take. They could only sense the beginning of the *Arabian Nights* tale that was to develop in the suburban home into which Coleridge had taken flight. Coleridge's main preoccupation henceforth, aside from literary work, was his precarious physical condition and his battle with opium. But beyond this he had gained, in fleeing from his many problems, one all-engrossing problem in his relation to Gillman. This held him for the rest of his days.

Charles and Mary Lamb managed to retain more or less touch with their lost idol. Lamb's oft-quoted sentence about Coleridge, written soon after his retirement, reported that 'His face, when he repeats his verses, hath its ancient glory, an archangel a little damaged'. Lamb thereafter paid occasional visits to his friend, but he was always restless under the Gillman presence and influence. Though no one knew better than he the acuteness of Coleridge's problem, he apparently regarded Gillman as an intrusion. 'I think the Gillmans would scarce trust him with me', he wrote to Wordsworth about inviting Coleridge for a visit. 'I have a malicious knack at cutting of apron-strings.'

James Gillman, who afterwards wrote a book about Coleridge, was a hard-working, reasonably successful physician residing and practising in the Highgate district. He and his doctor's gig formed one of the most familiar sights of the surrounding country roads. After Coleridge came to live with Gillman, he frequently accompanied the doctor on his rounds and sat waiting in the gig with a book in his hand.

To accept a complete stranger as a resident in his home, the physician must indeed have been 'captivated', as he put it. Coleridge's situation held a professional challenge for Gillman as well, since his case was so well known in London and had been already handled by several specialists. Gillman's treatment appears to have been to administer the opium in such nicely adjusted doses that Coleridge could sustain existence without entirely forgoing the habit. But to the end the situation remained an experiment—an experiment which lasted, however, for eighteen years.

Mrs. Gillman assumed a great part of the care and responsibility, since her husband's practice necessarily kept him so much away from home. It was Mrs. Gillman who took Coleridge to the seashore when he needed recreation and change. It was Mrs. Gillman who read and answered Mrs. Coleridge's letters to her husband—those cheerful communications which usually brought on a crisis in his condition, plunging him into the blackest depths of despondency. Mrs. Gillman glows softly in her husband's experiment like a rose planted by mistake in a chemist's laboratory vessel. An unusually beautiful woman, with a rare innocence of expression, she could only have meant to the wrecked poet within Coleridge a vision of grace and security.

It was Mrs. Gillman whom the gossips attacked when the prolonged situation came to be noticed. An old Christ's Hospital schoolmate of Charles Lamb told him that 'Coleridge . . . was living in a state of open adultery with Mrs. Gillman at Highgate'. If the story ever reached Mrs. Gillman, it had no effect on her bland deportment; nor on that of the rest of the trio. The relation remained stable. Gillman's condition of 'captivation' became permanent and Coleridge had no doubt learned through many broken friendships to be less exasperating. Once only in the whole eighteen years did he make a gesture of impatience. He moved to the home of Thomas Allsop, a lately-

acquired disciple, with the apparent intention of remaining. But both Mr. and Mrs. Gillman followed him up immediately and induced him to return.

The villa in the Grove revolved about Coleridge—his needs, his reputation, and his friends. The friends—more frequently, the strangers—who flocked to his shrine were made cordially welcome. The recluse held Thursday levees at the Gillmans' long after Lamb's evenings in Russell Street had been given up. The villa was rebuilt to add an upper study-chamber for Coleridge's special use. In all this, business arrangements seem to have played but a very minor part. Long afterwards Gillman's grandson affirmed that the physician received no financial reward for his services. The record is one of complete and disinterested devotion.

The general picture, already mysterious enough, is rendered more so by Gillman's historic reticence on the subject. His *Life of Coleridge* ended abruptly at the point where they met. The second volume, which was to have dealt with the years spent in Gillman's house, was never written. It is a simple fact that many projected books are never written, including many that Coleridge himself projected and never wrote; but the failure to realize Gillman's project seems to have a definite reason. His explanation that Coleridge's family objected to his writing it may be true. But his silence after Coleridge's death appears to be but a logical continuation of his reticence before that event.

The apparent subjection of Coleridge to Gillman about which Lamb complained is still without an explanation. The suggestion of hypnotism in James Gillman's treatment cannot be overlooked, especially as Coleridge is known to have been absorbedly interested at the time in the subject of animal magnetism. Yet the suburban physician suggests in no way an English Svengali.

What seems more probable is that Gillman had an unusually small amount of imagination and that Coleridge had at last dramatized himself before the wrong audience. Gillman had taken his expressed wishes quite literally and had simply acted upon them. If Coleridge ever regretted the success of his own eloquence—as on one occasion at least he did—he found himself surrounded by loving but hindering obstacles. This second and more prosaic hypothesis will probably appeal to most persons.



In all this while, Coleridge paid but two visits to his old friends the Lambs. In 1823 he spent a whole day with them at their Islington cottage. It was a memorable day because Coleridge seems to have laid aside for once the rather stiff new toga of virtue that he had lately acquired. An observant young woman who happened to be present has described Coleridge's leave-taking in the late evening: 'He had the walk to Highgate all before him. His friend begged earnestly that he might walk with him, but without avail. There was an affectionate parting, as if they had been boys rather than men, and it seemed to concentrate their lives into that minute. . . . Coleridge lingered on the threshold, as if he were leaving what had been a part of his heart's home for many years. . . . Another grasp of the hand, and a kiss of affection on Mary's cheek, and he was gone.'

It was five years before Coleridge visited the Lambs again. They were living at Enfield, and Coleridge stayed with them for a week. Lamb made scarcely any reference to this visit in his letters. During the intervening years Lamb's attention and interest had become increasingly diverted by his young ward. Coleridge was probably aware of some change, but only vaguely; for Emma Isola was visiting Miss Fryer during Coleridge's stay at Enfield. All that Coleridge knew was that Lamb insisted on walking him so incessantly through the lanes and by-ways of the vicinity that he acquired a pair of miserably sore feet and had to go to bed in consequence. That these were the paths grown familiar to Lamb through his long walks with Emma Isola, Coleridge could not guess. His one comment on the visit was that 'he had taken a good deal of exercise'.

From 1830 onward Coleridge became increasingly bedridden. Henry Nelson Coleridge, a nephew, who had made a late entrance into his uncle's life and who had eventually married Coleridge's daughter, figured now as a prop for his literary work. A second disciple, J. H. Green, served as an assiduous secretary collecting without discrimination masses of material into which even Coleridge's genius had never been able to force order and reason. Green's editorial efforts were naturally not more successful. But all the while the wonderful talker talked with no diminution of effect. The Thursday levees continued, with the white-haired philosopher conversing with undimmed brilliancy to the circle around his bed. It was thus that Lamb's

most beloved friend spent his last years, a broken-down physical organism, but a king of letters to the end.

Still the most determined of wives, Mrs Coleridge had come to live in London. It may have been a coincidence, upon which one need not dwell, that Coleridge's last break in health followed upon her arrival at her daughter's home in near-by Hampstead Heath. Henceforth a steady communication was kept up between the Hampstead Heath household and the one at Highgate. The Mercury who went back and forth was Mr. Gillman in his gig. The tactful physician managed to keep on terms of friendship with both ends of the line. Mrs. Coleridge, having all her life maintained the fiction that Coleridge was 'away from home', was thus enabled to carry on the impression that she was in close communication with him. It is not likely that she often saw him; except perhaps at the christening of a grandchild, a formal ceremony which Coleridge felt it incumbent upon himself to attend.

On the 25th of July 1834 Coleridge breathed his last. The queer little boy from Ottery St. Mary's, one of the greatest poets of an English era, was no more. Charles and Mary Lamb, in their twilight home at the Waldens', had not been in close touch with him for several years. They were intensely shocked by the news. 'When I heard of the death of Coleridge', wrote Charles, 'it was without grief. It seemed to me that he had long been on the confines of the next world,—that he had a hunger for eternity. I grieved then that I could not grieve. . . .' But Charles and Mary Lamb had been in the last thoughts of their expiring friend. He had written on his deathbed, in the margin of his poem 'This Lime-tree Bower', these words: 'Ch. and Mary Lamb—dear to my heart, yea, as it were, my heart. S. T. C. Aet 63, 1834. 1797–1834=37 years!'

Charles, who had not seen Coleridge for so long a time, went to visit the room in which he had died. With that peculiar relation to money which was so characteristic of him, he gave to the nurse who had attended the dying man a present of five guineas. In some unknown way this comforted him. In his boyhood, when he had been so pitifully poor on his apprentice's wages, he had made himself responsible for Coleridge's debts. With that gesture to the dead he revived perhaps for a moment the old Salutation and Cat days, before Coleridge had gone north to be married and Mary had stabbed her mother.

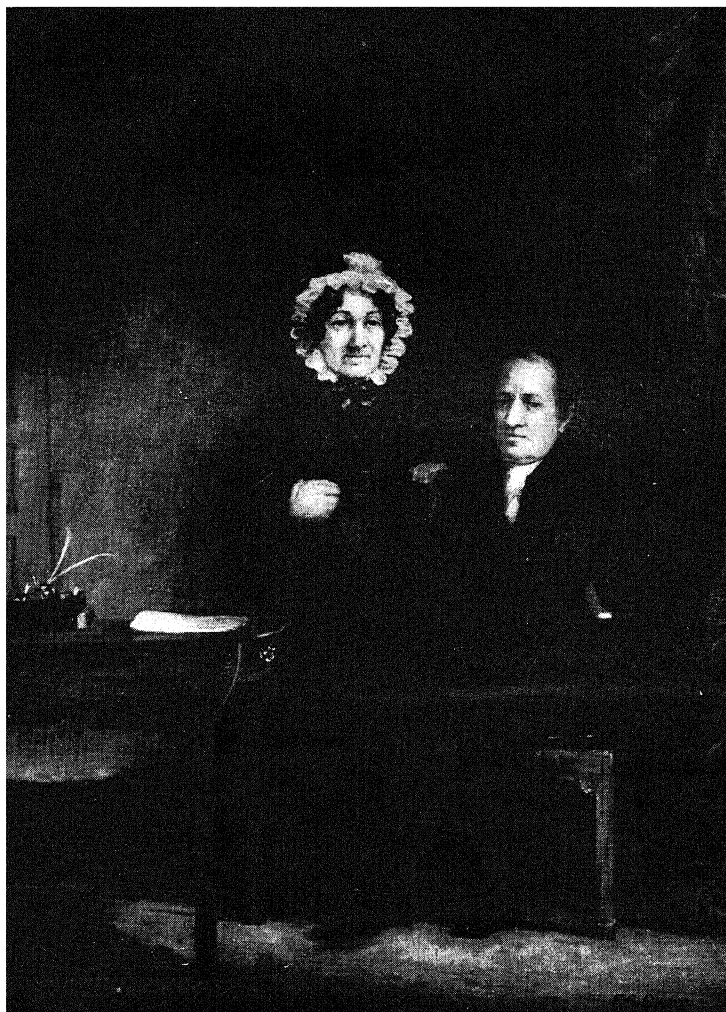
Mrs. Coleridge also paid a visit to Highgate. She went to condole with the Gillmans, whose grief she very surprisingly seemed to understand and respect. For once in her life she responded to the reality and not the pretence of things. But even this did not prevent her from returning home and setting down the conventional feelings of a widow on black-bordered stationery.

## 5

Charles and Mary Lamb spent the last months of the year 1834 in their customary sedentary way at the Waldens'. The only friends whom they saw intimately were Cary, of the British Museum, and Charles Ryle, the faithful representative of India House. It is pleasant to note that these scanty survivors of a host of friends were among the warmest and most understanding of them all. Ryle and his family lived at Islington—possibly in the same riverside house Charles and Mary had occupied—and the Lambs sometimes went there for visits. These visits and their monthly excursions to the British Museum formed their only recreation. Otherwise they lived in comparative solitude. Charles rambled as fanatically as ever over the countryside, but now always alone. Mary buried herself ever more deeply in her novels. It was the ultimate penalty of their self-sought loneliness that they ceased in the end to be company for each other.

Whether Lamb's habit of drinking grew any worse is impossible to know. It had long been sufficiently acute to be the cause of an accident such as took place three days before Christmas 1834. Charles had been lame from childhood; and, according to N. P. Willis, who saw him a few months before the accident, his lameness had increased with age. Strolling to the tavern on the morning of December the 22nd, he stumbled and fell, scratching his face against a stone. The wound, which at first seemed of no moment and received no medical attention, developed rapidly into a case of erysipelas.

The illness corresponds so thoroughly with the theory of William A. White, the American psychiatrist, concerning manic-depressive persons that it deserves at least passing mention. Dr. White found that manic-depressive patients suffered more often than others from the serious consequences of slight



MARY AND CHARLES LAMB IN 1834

*Painting by F. S. Cary [N.P.G.]*



scratches and bruises. Charles Lamb's case appears to confirm this clinical theory. For that reason it is inaccurate to attribute his end, as many of his contemporaries and biographers have done, to the habit of drink. It would be more accurate to say that it was the final crisis of a mental illness which he had endured and bravely withstood for a reasonably long lifetime.

When Ryle came over from Islington to see Lamb on the day after Christmas, in kindly observance of the season, he found his friend a dangerously sick man. He sent a message at once to Judge Talfourd, who arrived at Lamb's bedside the next morning. To him, as to Ryle, it was apparent that the stricken man was approaching his end. In the afternoon of that day, the 27th of December 1834, only five days after the seemingly slight accident, Charles Lamb breathed his last.

It happened that Mary Lamb was in one of her attacks when her brother died. But Ryle led her into the dim room to view the remains. What she saw on the bed was a little boy, whom she had tended and run after in Inner Temple Gardens, lying asleep. Ryle wrote: 'When she saw her brother dead, she observed on his "beauty" when asleep, and apprehended nothing further.'

Charles Lamb's funeral took place on one of the first cold days of January. Mary, though supposed to be out of her mind, pointed out the spot in the Edmonton churchyard where her brother had once said he would like to lie. It adjoined a well-worn footpath leading to the crenellated church. The group which stood about the grave assembled 'the old familiar faces' of Ryle, Talfourd, Moxon, Allsop, Cary, and Procter. After the men left the churchyard, they turned in at Lamb's favourite tavern, the Bell, for refreshment. Meanwhile Mary Lamb sat in the dim book-strewn parlour and to all appearances apprehended nothing. No doubt the Waldens gave her a glass of wine on that day as they had done on the day of Emma Isola's wedding. But it mercifully failed to awaken her.

## 6

Loyal Edward Moxon felt that no lesser genius than Wordsworth should write the epitaph for Lamb's tombstone. At his request, Wordsworth sent a memorial poem, which he admitted was 'much too long for an out-door stone, among our rain,

damps, etc.' It was never used, but not solely because of its inappropriate length. Mary Lamb, on recovering her usually excellent judgement, did not care for it. Wordsworth had characteristically given a one-sided view of Charles Lamb; he had dwelt on his exemplary behaviour as a man and a brother, not failing to mention the simplicity of his station in life, and had said almost nothing about his literary achievements. Mary's greater wisdom as well as her feelings resented the omission. The simple and brief epitaph finally used on the headstone was composed by Cary, who managed, even in so small a space, to include some appreciation of the genius of Elia:

*Yet art thou not all lost, thro' many an age  
With sterling sense and humour shall thy page  
Win many an English bosom, pleased to see  
That old and happier vein revived in thee*

One would not expect a clerk at India House to die intestate, no matter how small his property. Nor was such the case with Charles Lamb. As for his property, it was large enough to cause some surprise to his friends.

Lamb's first will had been made just after the move to Islington, when he was forty-eight. 'I want to make my will, and to leave my property in trust for my sister', he had written to Thomas Allsop, in requesting him to act as executor. 'The other two I shall beg the same favour of are Talfourd and Procter', Lamb had added. The will which survived him was made in the autumn of 1830. In this only two executors were named, Charles Ryle and Talfourd. In the seven intervening years matters had reshaped themselves in various ways. The vicissitudes of Allsop's life had eliminated him from the scene. Talfourd and Procter, both of whom were authors as well as lawyers, had grown to be unnecessary duplicates of each other. Lamb had retained Talfourd. It was to Lamb himself that the interval had brought the greatest change. During this time his life had been refocused by his interest in Emma Isola. His last will directed that a trust be created to provide for Mary's support primarily, with any eventual remainder after her death to go to Emma Isola Moxon.

Lamb's final estate, as has been said, surprised his closest friends. Crabb Robinson, for instance, on hearing of Lamb's death, wrote at once to offer to contribute towards Mary's sup-

posed necessities. The executors believed at first that Lamb had left a £1,000's worth of investments, but found out later that the total amounted to twice as much. According to Talfourd's statement, this would yield an annuity of £240 for Mary's lifetime. In addition, India House at once granted her a pension of £120. An ironical fate had decided that Mary should have an income at the age of seventy amounting to four-fifths of the sum that she and Charles had lived on for so many years. Her comfort and security were well ensured for the rest of her days.

## 7

It is a melancholy sidelight on Charles Lamb's career that the *Essays of Elia* were out of print at the time of his death. He felt the public's neglect keenly. 'I never wrote anything that would sell', he mourned, half-humorously, the year before he died: 'I am the publisher's ruin.' It is true that after a short burst of popularity the *Essays* had been forgotten. Lamb's alleged indifference to religion may have had something, and possibly much, to do with this decline. His honesty, democracy, and whimsical charity were no compensation in that taut and over-strict moral age for orthodoxy of faith. One of the most eminent of English essayists died believing himself to be a literary failure.

His fame had somehow escaped reproach in America. Nathaniel Parker Willis had forced himself, so it was said, into Lamb's company in order to write about him for a New York newspaper. Willis's excuse for his abuse of Robinson's hospitality—if it had occurred to him that one was necessary—would have been his passionate admiration for Lamb, and Lamb's exceedingly great appeal for the American public. Whether he succeeded in conveying these cheerful facts to Lamb in Robinson's oppressively solemn dining-room is perhaps doubtful. Lamb unfortunately knew little about America and the odd messenger sent to him. If Willis had come back from the Elizabethan past, Lamb would have recognized his credentials instantly. The New World which honoured him belonged to the future, however—a domain in which Charles Lamb professedly took small interest.

But the news of his success in America had already been



borne to him from other sources. To Mrs William Ayrton, who had sent him a long American review, he replied: 'I do not know which to admire most, your kindness or your patience, in copying out that intolerable rabble of panegyric from over the Atlantic.' One suspects that Lamb appreciated the panegyric more than he was willing to admit and that he was really thankful for this bright rift in the cloud of dullness which overhung his exile at Edmonton.

Lamb's literary decline in England was only temporary. His star was soon to rise again and to shine so steadily and increasingly that Swinburne could say in 1886 that 'the best beloved of English writers will always be Charles Lamb'. In the meantime Lamb's influence had not failed to assert itself silently on the writing folk of the coming generation. His legend was still powerful in the literary life of London.

It was at this time that the talent of young Charles Dickens was finding its way and shaping itself. There is a fundamental kinship between the genius of Charles Lamb and that of Charles Dickens. Though Lamb disdained fiction and refused all his life to read it, his *Essays* were a kind of fiction; while Dickens, who embraced the art of fiction almost exclusively, produced works that were more like Lamb's *Essays* than the earlier English novels which he professed to follow. In style, humour, and humanity Lamb and Dickens were very closely allied.

It may be only because the same trials and hardships as children gave them both the same vivid sympathy, the same combination of humour and pathos which they used towards the poor and outcast. The 'Praise of Chimney Sweepers' and some passages in *Oliver Twist* might have been written by the same man. But it seems unlikely that this close similarity between their conditions could be the only cause. Something more tangible and real than similar childhood memories presumably connected them.

Yet there is no indication in Dickens's memoirs that he ever saw or met Charles Lamb. He was a ten-year-old boy in a shoe-blacking warehouse when Lamb abandoned Russell Street for the country. Henceforth Lamb saw little of the literary world in London. Dickens's youth and Lamb's premature retirement separated them physically. As a rising author, however, Dickens was early brought in contact with many of Lamb's old associates. Among Dickens's close friends were Procter, Talfourd, Leigh

Hunt, Mathews, and Rogers, all of whom had known and revered Charles Lamb. John Forster, who was mentioned at the time of Lamb's death as a suitable biographer, was the same Forster who afterwards wrote the life of Charles Dickens. Forster and Talfourd, Lamb's friends at the end, stood as literary godfathers to *Pickwick Papers*.

Knowing all the legends of Lamb so well, Dickens could not but have known Lamb himself as intimately as one could by hearsay. His early career was nursed by friends loyal to the essayist. Little as Elia would have dreamed of it, or cared for it, he left his mark on a coming novelist. But what Dickens actually knew of Lamb never escaped the unopened Pandora's box of his habitual and lifelong reserve.

## CHAPTER XII

### *Turn of the Cycle*

**A**FTER Charles Lamb's death Mary Lamb lived on alone at Edmonton for a stretch of six years. Though her friends made some attempt to get her to return to London, she silently resisted their efforts. At first they did not expect her to survive her loss for any great length of time and patiently refrained from urging her. Mary perhaps shared this belief; she refused at any rate to leave the spot whence she could easily walk daily to her brother's graveside. So she remained at the Waldens' in an isolation seldom broken except when the faithful friends Crabb Robinson and Fanny Kelly visited her.

Judge Talfourd, portrayed by Dickens as Tommy Traddles, who 'held it as a solemn duty in the boys to stand by one another', seems to have been the most humane if not the most understanding of Mary's guardians. He protested strongly against abandoning her to the exclusive society of the kind-hearted but wholly untutored Waldens. He exerted himself in futile efforts to prevent this. Robinson likewise bestirred himself to that end in his own way. Mary herself admitted within a year after Charles's death that she would like to return to London and live with Sarah James.

But none of these well-meant intentions happened to coincide and pull together. It is not strange if, in the course of time, some friction arose among so many well-meaning persons. Talfourd told a third party that Moxon did not pay enough attention to Mary Lamb; and Moxon, on hearing this, became highly indignant. What promised to be a major quarrel was averted only by the tactful interference of still another party. Peace was restored and the disjointed movement to transfer Mary to London rambled on for another four years.

At last the deadlock was broken through the intervention of Bryan Waller Procter. Procter, who combined the career of a poet with that of a lawyer, and held in addition the position of a

Commissioner of Lunacy, injected an official note into the situation. Nevertheless, it was Mary who, at the age of seventy-seven, made the plan effective by her own decision. She told Procter, who visited her on a long midsummer day in 1841, that she was tired of the Waldens' society and wished to return to London. She explained that she had been loath to cut off the couple's income and that she had also been interested in their growing children. But now the children were older and their mother had, according to Mary, developed a 'temper'. All in all, she thought she would prefer to live in London with Miss James. And thus the change was at last quite simply and easily arranged.

In those days St. John's Wood was not the long and dull expanse of uniform houses which it afterwards became, but a real garden district on the outskirts of London. Mary was soon domiciled at 41, Alpha Road, in the home of Miss James's sister, Mrs. Parsons. For the first time in her life she was delighted with moving. She wrote to her old friends at Widdford: 'I long to show you what a nice snug place I have got into—in the midst of a pleasant little garden. I have a room for myself and my old books on the ground floor, and a little bed-room up two pairs of stairs. When you come to town . . . an omnibus from the Bell and Crown in Holborn would bring you to our door in a quarter of an hour. If your dear mother does not venture so far, I will contrive to pop down to see her.'

Sarah James and Mrs. Parsons had both leased houses in this new vicinity. Miss James took in general lodgers, mostly literary folk; while Mrs. Parsons, who was also a professional nurse for the insane, reserved her hospitality for Mary. She probably received £200 a year for Mary's board and care. This, at least, was the amount once named by Lamb as customary at that time for the private care of insane patients. As we know, Mary's income could well afford the sum. Miss James and her sister had once been described by Lamb as 'the daughters of a Welsh clergyman of the greatest respectability'. Originally Mary's nurse, Miss James had grown to be a steady and loyal friend. Thus Mary had at last directed her life into competent professional hands as well as into the society of amiable and refined companions.

At once her social life displayed a second blossoming. An interesting sidelight on the friends whom she especially valued

is thrown by this passage in her letter to Widford: 'I am in the midst of many friends—Mr. and Mrs. Kenney, Mr. and Mrs. Hood, Barron Field and his brother Frank and their wives etc., all within a short walk.' One misses the names of the formal and stately guardians who also lived not very far away.

Foremost among them, Crabb Robinson, housed impressively in Russell Square, celebrated Mary's return by a dinner given in her honour. The other guests were Mr. and Mrs. Edward Quillinan and Mr. and Mrs. Henry Nelson Coleridge. Wordsworth's daughter and Coleridge's daughter, with their young faces, must have awakened deep memories in the mind of the little old lady sitting so quietly at the table. It was related that Mary said almost nothing throughout the whole evening.

## 2

Turning to the subject of Mary Lamb's mental malady is like turning from one person to another. Mary Lamb had two lives, one of which is a well-known chronicle and the other a well-kept silence. As long as Lamb lived, Mary retreated into her second self periodically—a self whose feelings, thoughts, and doings were practically unknown to others. After Lamb's death she retired, by common report, almost entirely into this lost personality. That she lived in a permanent twilight broken only by rare and transient intervals of reason was long the accepted legend. Until quite recently this was the only picture one had of her last thirteen years

It took an American scholar of an investigating turn of mind to correct the superficial tradition. Professor Ernest A. Ross, of the University of Oklahoma, brought the necessary enterprise to the task of correction. Aware of the nature of the manio-depressive psychosis, he questioned the theory of a permanent breakdown in Mary Lamb's last years. Resorting for information to the invaluable papers of Crabb Robinson, still preserved in a private library in London, he was duly rewarded for his scholarly intuition. Robinson's literal observations on Mary Lamb's attacks, so uncannily paired with his real affection for her, were found to continue onward after her brother's death. By this means Professor Ross was enabled to complete the record of Mary Lamb's subsequent life.

Her history, thus brought to the end, was one of lifelong

attacks and lifelong recoveries. The only noticeable change in her later years was that her attacks seemed to last longer. It was of this that Lamb spoke when not long before his death he expressed a doubt 'if she gets well at all, which every successive illness puts me in fear of. She has less and less strength to throw it off . . .'. His foreboding proved untrue, however. Mary recovered from each attack as inevitably as she succumbed to it. Near the end, as Mr. Ross points out, the normal infirmities of old age complicated her malady somewhat; but, on the whole, the pattern remained unchanged as long as she lived. Between her attacks she was always the same Mary Lamb, giving no evidence of any fatal loss of mind through her abnormal crises. In the late seventies she was studying French, reading Montaigne's *Essays*, and guiding the education of an intelligent youth.

The hidden Mary Lamb, by turns excited and depressed, preserved her secret self successfully to the last. Considering the frequency of her outbreaks and the number of her friends, it seems surprising that so few saw and described her in this state. Coleridge is the only person besides her brother to whom she willingly exposed herself in her estranged condition. She appealed to him once at the onset of an attack. Coleridge took her at once to the hospital, not daring to wait until Lamb returned from India House. Talfourd maintains that he frequently saw her in these phases; but this would have been only after Lamb's death, for Lamb had been as intent as she on protecting her privacy. Once only and not until very late in life did he allow himself to describe his sister's mania. But from long experience he had learned the characteristic trend of her ravings. His picture has the value of a description from long-accumulated observations.

In a letter to Maria Fryer, Emma Isola's school friend, he wrote: 'When she is not violent, her rambling chat is better to me than the sense and sanity of this world. Her heart is obscured, not buried; it breaks out occasionally; and one can discern a strong mind struggling with the billows that have gone over it . . . Her memory is unnaturally strong; and from ages past, if we may so call the earliest records of our poor life, she fetches thousands of names and things that never would have dawned upon me again, and thousands from the ten years she lived before me. What took place from early girlhood to

her coming of age principally lives again (every important thing and every trifle) in her brain with the vividness of real presence. For twelve hours incessantly she will pour out without intermission all her past life, forgetting nothing, pouring out name after name to the Waldens as a dream; sense and nonsense; truths and errors huddled together; a medley between inspiration and possession. What things we are!'

To this authentic testimony as to where Mary lived during her mental absences may be added the further description by Talfourd: 'She would fancy herself in the days of Queen Anne or George the First; and describe the brocaded dames and courtly manners as though she had been bred among them, in the best style of the old comedy. It was all broken and disjointed, so that the hearer could remember little of her discourse; but the fragments were like the jewelled speeches of Congreve, only shaken from their settings. There was sometimes even a vein of crazy logic running through them, associating things essentially most dissimilar, but connecting them by a verbal association in a strange order. It was as if the finest elements of the mind had been shaken into fantastic combinations, like those of a kaleidoscope.'

One could hardly find a more apt illustration of the forceful influence of early impressions than is contained in these passages. If the Waldens, or Miss James, or Sir George Tuthill had been in control of the modern technique of interpreting these visions, as definite and well formed as they were, Mary might conceivably have been greatly helped along the road to health and happiness.

She seems incidentally to have gone from good to bad in the matter of professional care, until she ended at last in the hands of a chance country practitioner. A social crony and card-playing neighbour of Charles Lamb's, Dr. James Vale Asbury, finally took over the treatment of her attacks. Asbury applied leeches to the top of her head and solemnly reported that the leeches fell dead from the heat. He was vastly emphatic about Mary's attacks proceeding from a *physical cause*, evidently wishing to place them in a pathological domain where he felt secure. The blundering Asbury probably did as much good with his leeches, however, as the specialists of London, who, though advanced in the matter of diagnosis, were handicapped by the want of any healing procedure.

Charles Lamb and his friends tried to ferret out the cause of his sister's attacks. Both he and they owned themselves baffled. Finally Charles came to the conclusion that it was not possible to single out any particular cause. If one thing had not brought on the attack, he said, something else might have done so; it was always 'a case of conjecture'. This agreed with the expert opinion of modern times, which merely adds that the cause is so deep-seated that ordinary observation cannot reach it. This is one of several observations of Lamb's which show him to have been a real student of the problem of insanity. In his later years his interest in the matter led him to become one of the trustees of the York Insane Asylum, the most progressive institution of the kind in England.

Mary Lamb's opinions concerning the treatment of the insane have unquestionable value and authority. She spoke but little on the subject. But on one occasion she wrote to Sarah Stoddart, whose aged mother had succumbed to the ailment, the following words of astute counsel: 'Do not, I conjure you, let her unhappy malady afflict you too deeply. I speak *from experience* and from the opportunity I have had of much observation in such cases that insane people, in the fancies they take in their heads, do not feel as one in a sane state of mind does under the real evil of poverty, the perception of having done wrong, or of any such thing that runs in their heads.

'Think as little as you can; and let your whole care be to be certain that she is treated with *tenderness*. I lay a stress upon this because it is a thing of which people in her state are uncommonly susceptible, and which hardly anyone is aware of; a hired nurse *never*, even though in all other respects they are a good kind of people. I do not think your own presence necessary, unless she *takes to you very much*, except for the purpose of seeing with your own eyes that she is very kindly treated.'

She wrote again a few days later in the same vein, thus showing how much importance she attached to the idea of kindness. 'I talked about your mother's illness in a way, which I have since feared you might construe into my having a doubt of your showing her proper attention without my impertinent interference. . . . But while I was writing, the many poor souls in the kind of desponding way she is whom I have seen come fresh into my mind; and all the mismanagement with which I have seen them treated was strong in my mind; and



I wrote under a forcible impulse which I could not at the time resist.'

Mary's criticism, with its gentle understatement, scarcely does justice to the harsh conditions which prevailed in her day. Much has been corrected since that time. The violence of the manic outbursts of patients has been directly reduced as the result of the reduction in the violent methods of handling them. This alone shows how right she was. Whether the *tenderness* which she recommended can be produced through doctors' orders and specialists' prescriptions may be doubted somewhat. One thing is certain: it can be well simulated. Another thing of equal certainty is that Mary did not speak merely from sentimentalism. She spoke from long awareness and from the observation of hundreds of other patients like herself.

An apparent deterioration in Mary Lamb's ageing personality is suggested by her reported kleptomania. W. C. Hazlitt, the grandson of Sarah Hazlitt, is responsible for the story. He related that Mary Lamb would take her empty snuffboxes to friends' houses to be filled; and that furthermore any small article that she liked she carried away hidden in her pocket handkerchief. This dates from her life in St. John's Wood and may have been a matter of conscious sponging and theft.

Mary Lamb, though well provided for, very probably had no pocket-money. In those days women had no property rights in England; what they owned was handled for them by others. While Charles lived, his sister had of course received money from him as she needed it. When he died, her income was handled for her by guardians. At that time she became obsessed with the fear of poverty. It is unlikely that any strenuous, humane, and practical effort was made to disabuse her of the notion. The honourable trustees paid generously out of her income the claims of those who maintained and served her, but it is highly probable that no actual money was ever given her. This might explain her dire fear of poverty in her last well-provided-for days.

Crabb Robinson brought her presents—fruit, cakes, and novels. He gave her an elegant shawl for Christmas. But that Robinson ever brought her a tin of good Blackguard is hardly thinkable. He readily gave a half-crown to the boy whom he found playing cards with her, when a half-crown of her own would have bought for her the snuff that she needed. It was

the same with other trifling necessities. She was obliged to beg for them or to steal them. Who in those days would have thought that a failing old lady, out of her mind half the time, needed to have money in her pocket? This could hardly have been expected of the conscientious barristers engaged in protecting her.

That Mary's so-called kleptomania represented a form of her disease, then, may be doubted. It shows, perhaps, a deterioration of character, but scarcely a deterioration of mind. She continued otherwise to show herself to be as sound of mind in her sane intervals as most ordinary sane people of her age. A rarely distinguished person, honoured and deservedly so to her last breath, she never lost the fine dignity of deportment that she and Charles together had always manifested.

## 3

Mary Lamb's imprint on her contemporaries, if not so richly productive as her brother's, lingered on in many after-images. As an inspiring personal influence she was only secondary to Charles. She should have left more of a mark on the women of her time, but her ideas were too far ahead of her age to attract a following. As it was, she made her strongest impression on the very young. Mary Lamb was an instinctive teacher. Her maternal heart found its greatest satisfaction, after its delight in Charles, in her relations with children.

The fine Shakespearian critic and scholar Mary Cowden Clarke was a pupil of Mary Lamb's. As a young girl Mrs. Cowden Clarke was sent daily to Miss Lamb to study Latin grammar and poetry. Her memoirs form one of our best sources of information about her teacher. The loyalty and admiration she expresses so vividly testify strongly to Mary Lamb's natural ability as a teacher. 'As may be gathered from the books which Miss Lamb wrote,' says Mrs. Cowden Clarke, 'she had a most tender sympathy with the young. She was encouraging and affectionate towards them, and won them to regard her with a familiarity and fondness rarely felt by them for grown people who are not their relations.'

This pupil, who afterwards made an impression on her age as an author and critic, acquired her taste for Shakespearian scholarship from Mary Lamb. Mary's interests and tastes are

seen in the direction of her pupil's life work. Mrs. Cowden Clarke became celebrated for her critical works on Shakespeare, including a monumental *Concordance*, a volume on Shakespeare's heroines, and annotated editions of all the plays. Still another inheritance from Mary Lamb crops out in a quaint encyclopaedic book on *World-noted Women; or Types of Womanly Attributes of All Lands and Ages*. While the pupil evidently lacked the creative spark of the teacher, she still carried on in a graceful and scholarly way the fine torch which had been handed to her. Merely to sustain the relation of women to letters was a mission which Mary Lamb would have thought worthy and honourable.

A second pupil of Mary Lamb's was young William Hazlitt. Conspicuous as a child, the only son of William and Sarah Hazlitt was good-looking, talented, and brilliant. Mary Lamb taught him Latin. The boy, who must have been eight or nine years of age at the time, rattled off his conjugations with a speed that made little Mary Novello, the future Mrs. Cowden Clarke, pale with envy. Just what his relations were with his teacher, the old and trusted friend of his father and his mother, he never revealed in memoirs. But he showed much in his actions. It was he who treasured and preserved the letters of Mary Lamb to his mother. William Hazlitt led as a man a rather quiet and repressed life, as many persons are prone to do when their childhood has proved too stormy.

Even the Enfield neighbour's boy, Thomas Westwood, did not escape the effect of Mary Lamb's moulding hands. The son of the village insurance agent, he was developed into an accountant by Charles Lamb's patronage, and eventually entered the English consular service. But from mere association with Mary Lamb he had acquired ambition, the love of books, and even the love of writing. Mary's methods were most simple. 'When any notable visitors made their appearance at the cottage, Mary Lamb's benevolent tap at my window-pane seldom failed to summon me out, and I was presently ensconced in a quiet corner of their sitting-room, half hid in some great man's shadow.' Young Westwood proved a credit to his patroness, by making a substantial career for himself and by developing into a pleasant and truthful writer about the unique couple he had known.

We find Mary at the age of eighty still manifesting enough

vitality to guide young Hollingshead. Characteristically she turned to whatever material lay near at hand. The nephew of her nurses and friends, Miss James and Mrs. Parsons, fell into the role of protégé inevitably as a part of her environment. John Hollingshead, whom Crabb Robinson described as the good-natured lad he found playing cards with Mary, enjoyed the distinction of being her last pupil. The lively boy had dreams that compared with Mary's and Charles's dearest interests from early childhood—dreams of the theatre. But without Mary's stimulation London might never perhaps have known the historic Gaiety Theatre, with which John Hollingshead enlivened the staid city. Without this he might never have had the enterprise that brought the joy-making Sarah Bernhardt to the sober English-speaking world. If so—and it may well be so, for teachers are an unmeasured influence—the fact may be added to the sum of the gifts bestowed by Mary Lamb on posterity.

John Hollingshead gives a remarkably fine picture of a rare companionship. 'Sometimes we played at cards, her favourite pastime, such games as I had any knowledge of, and sometimes when she was tired or liked to roam about the garden, I was allowed to browse upon the books which walled in the apartment. Most of them were author's copies, simply bound in rough paper or boards, with ragged-edged leaves and ample margins. They were fifty years in advance of the modern artistic publisher. Many of the folios were there that had been bought by Charles Lamb in his roamings and brought home and carefully collated with his sister, by the aid of a tallow candle. The old dramatists were, of course, well represented and the picaresque school of fiction, noticeably *The Rogue* and the *Adventures of Don Guzman*, etc. . . .

'Visitors sometimes came in and I was allowed to watch them from a corner. William Godwin . . . Tom Hood . . . little Miss Kelly, the actress . . . and Crabb Robinson, who had a trustee air. . . .

'In my wanderings, especially in the autumn, I found my way to this orchard, which was only one of many in the same road, and after giving a defiant challenge to English cholera, I spent the rest of the afternoon with the dreamy old lady, who looked over me rather than at me and seemed to see many visions that were beyond my limited intelligence. In the cool of the

evening, when the bats were flying about, I was allowed a pinch of snuff out of the historic silver box, marked M.L.'

These instances of Mary Lamb's association with the young open the way to an appreciation of her fine natural talent as a teacher. She combined the spirit of *Mrs. Leicester* with the resources of a self-taught but accomplished classical scholar. What her skill must have done for her brother ten years younger than herself may be guessed from its effect upon strangers. The child whom she led by the hand while he spelled out the letters on the tombstones was already being prepared for the career of a scholar and author. When she saw the youth of sixteen wasting his talents, as she believed, at a tavern, the outraged maternal instinct reached the last stages of desperation. It was then that she committed her crime. Yet she still survived the crisis in managing to take and hold the high ground she had previously dreamed of for herself. Charles Lamb became the ornament of English letters largely because of Mary's passionate and unreserved gift of herself to him.

## 4

Mary Lamb's age had been an age of talented women. Many of her friends among them proved like herself to be tough-fibred and long-lived. While she passed slowly and deliberately through the long afternoon of life, some of those who had once been near to her accompanied her at a distance, at various posts and with varying fortunes. Lamb was dead; Coleridge was dead; Hazlitt was dead. Even the tenacious Godwin had at last passed on. But the women who had helped to shape their lives and careers still followed the path that issued from long memories.

Mrs. Godwin's alliance with Mary Lamb had long since been a matter of history. That brief but epoch-making association had never been resumed after the apparent failure of Mary's *Tales* and the actual failure of Mrs. Godwin's publishing venture. Shortly before Lamb's death John Rickman had invited William Godwin to Edmonton to meet Lamb and have dinner with him at the Bell. Mary Lamb and Mrs. Godwin had no place in this party, for after the Lambs' removal to Edmonton, Charles's social life had been turned into an affair of stag-parties at the tavern. Mary had no longer any place in it. What a

far cry this was from the candle-lit card-table of the Temple chambers, around which the Lambs and the Godwins had planned their literary enterprises and their schemes of conquest of the theatre!

As for Mrs. Godwin, the 'bitch', she obviously had more brains, character, and talent than Charles Lamb allowed her. Laden as she was with that combination of giant and pygmy, her husband, she could not but have known bitter disappointment in life. Lamb's asperities against her sharp-tongued, prying qualities should be taken with a grain of salt. His opinion of Godwin, however, was just and adequate. It should have taught him to manifest more leniency towards the woman who had joined Godwin's career with energy and hopefulness only to find out that with him all plans failed. The once ambitious but finally thoroughly subjugated Mrs. Godwin ended by sharing with her husband the meagre aid of a condescending government. Mrs. Godwin survived Godwin's death by five years, a broken and enfeebled remnant of an egotist's long career. She died in the same year in which Mary returned to London to live with Mrs. Parsons.

Mary Matilda Betham, who had once shed a bright light on Mary Lamb's path, had turned her back on literature. Both Mary and Charles had held the versatile talents of this friend in high esteem. Mary's letters to her had been for a time in a vein almost as intimate as that she used with Sarah Stoddart. But Matilda Betham's candle, burned too early and at both ends, had soon flickered out. While the Lambs still kept open house in Russell Street, Miss Betham had retired to the country with broken health. Later, however, she returned to London to make a considerable impression as a salonist in her own right. When Lamb heard of her return, he wrote cordially 'Let us be among the first persons you come to see.' Welcomed thus warmly by him and others, Matilda Betham attempted in her way to imitate Lamb's old career. Her soirées had not the brilliance of Lamb's evenings, but they had a character of their own. In her little white cap, from which her grey hair escaped in a somewhat untidy and unfeminine fashion, she radiated an informal atmosphere especially attractive to the young. One of her nieces, Mary Betham Edwards, bred up under this influence, afterwards wrote a life of Mary Lamb.

Fanny Kelly, faithful friend and dauntless actress, lived to the

grand old age of ninety. Of all the praises sung of her, those of young Thomas Westwood sound most engaging. 'The most unprofessional of actresses and unspoiled of women', he called her. In her early forties (some time after Charles Lamb asked her to marry him) Fanny Kelly had said one day to Mary Lamb: 'I am now nothing but a stocking-mending old woman.' Mary Lamb, who began the study of French and Italian after she was fifty, pooh-poohed this in a tone that can be imagined. She was right. Years afterwards Miss Kelly founded a school for actresses and ruined herself nobly as a theatrical producer. Fanny Kelly was a genuine career woman at heart—the kind of woman for whom Mary had a deep and abiding understanding. The friendship between them lasted without interruption, sustained by faithful visits from Miss Kelly, until Mary Lamb passed from the scene. Hollingshead records that he saw her in Mary Lamb's rooms at Mrs. Parsons's.

The group of women at the Lakes, with the exception of Mrs. Coleridge, finished their lives on their cold and frosty pinnacle. The Fricker sisters, the Hutchinson sisters, and the unique Dorothy Wordsworth had found lifelong security in the shadows of their great men. They had always radiated a general atmosphere of refinement and culture but had scarcely attained the rank of Bluestockings. Fate dealt with them variously in their personal lives, distributing here and there blows almost equal to those Mary Lamb had suffered. Mrs. Coleridge carried a bit of Keswick with her to London. She spent her last years in St. John's Wood, not very far distant from Mrs. Parsons; but Mary Lamb did not mention her among the old friends in her vicinity. Presumably they did not resume their old acquaintance. Little love had been lost between the two women. Such consideration as had been shown between them had proceeded from Mary's side entirely. If either thought of the other with tolerance as the fires of life slowly faded, it is fair to assume that the tolerance was in Mary's mind rather than Mrs. Coleridge's.

Misfortune and tragedy had not passed by 'the fine ladies of Keswick'. The year-long affliction of Mary Lamb had made its belated appearance among them. Mrs. Southey had succumbed to a sudden and severe attack of insanity, necessitating her removal to a hospital. She had been the most non-committal

of the Fricker sisters, apparently satisfied with the anonymity of wifehood and motherhood 'There was no suspicion of anything like derangement in her case', said Mrs Coleridge. Yet after years of prosaic adjustment she went mad suddenly. She was sent to the York Insane Asylum, of which Charles Lamb was a trustee, and remained there without improvement until she died

Most striking was the case of Dorothy Wordsworth, who, in the year following Mrs. Southey's breakdown, was all at once struck in the same manner. She was not violent, but inane and foolish. Like Mrs. Southey, she never recovered, but she lived for twenty years. Wordsworth's family took devoted care of her at home—a plan which exposed her condition to the observation of visitors and strangers and must have given the Wordsworths great pain. The pen of Crabb Robinson jotted down the following notes: 'She has the habit of blowing with her lips very loudly and disagreeably and sometimes of uttering a strange scream something between the noise of a turkey and a partridge, but more shrill than either. She can be withdrawn from this only by being made to repeat verses which she composed.' The verses, he added, were trivial rhymes. The former Dorothy Wordsworth survived only as a broken memory and a shattered image. She who had once pitied Mary Lamb for her sufferings was infinitely more to be pitied.

Much happier in her London lodgings, though a sufferer from arthritis, was the ageing Sarah Hazlitt. She had no permanent home, moving whenever necessary to be near friends or her son. Sarah Hazlitt was happier because she had the memories of her fulfilled life—however strangely fulfilled—and her strong-minded interests to keep her wholly sane. Like Mary Lamb, Sarah had always been a rapid and intelligent reader; and, as also with Mary, her real problem in old age was to obtain enough books. Circulating libraries were in their infancy. Always unconventional, Sarah Hazlitt would tie a large satchel around her waist and go forth to borrow reading matter. She required not *a book* but *books*. Her days of fine muslin embroidery were over, because of her stiff joints, and she had more time to read. One may assume that her critical taste had in no way depreciated. Like Mary Lamb, she lived in her old age the same life that she had lived in her youth. Both women had rare stability: Mary Lamb, too, despite her periodic lapses



Sarah Hazlitt died at last in solitary lodgings, as William Hazlitt had died in his time. Her son found the diary of her divorce and Mary Lamb's letters in her bureau. The documents, taken all together, told the full story of the Hazlitts' amazing marriage. They were never published by the son, whose sufferings from the story recorded had left their own memories. The boy who had rattled off his Latin conjugations so brilliantly to Mary Lamb in Russell Street had not then foreseen the painful drama that the journal unfolded. The man refused to look back on the record. But what his mother had kept inviolate, he did not destroy.

## 5

Time had at last come to an end for Mary Lamb. Her strong, well-knit, shapeless body was beginning to break up. Mary was eighty years old. Her teeth were gone; she mumbled her words in a way very annoying to her friend Crabb Robinson, now elderly also. She was handicapped by deafness. Her card-playing had fallen off a bit, though John Hollingshead, now grown into a gangling youth of eighteen, amiably kept up his games with her. Her eyes, however, supported by spectacles, remained her last and most abiding resource. She could still enjoy her old books and read new ones with pleasure.

But she could no longer run her own life. Other hands took control. Mrs. Parsons assumed more responsibility for her as Mary became more of an invalid. A year before her last physical failure Mary was mentally normal enough to register one of her typical insane attacks. It was brought on, they said, by the death of Mrs. Randal Norris, her girlhood friend. The attack appears to have been violent, for she dislocated a shoulder-bone, probably in rebellion against her straitjacket. Mrs. Parsons was much blamed for the accident, although as an incidental result Mary was quickly restored to reason by the pain in her shoulder.

Little note was taken by her official friends of this happy turn. Her dislocated shoulder-bone monopolized all their attention. It was true that Mary was quite old now, standing on the verge of eighty, and old bones, as everyone knows, require care and protection. Mrs. Talfourd, accompanied by Crabb Robinson, repaired at once to St. John's Wood and took

Mrs. Parsons sternly to task. The mission suggests an elaborate effort on the part of the trustees (though neither Robinson nor Mrs. Talfourd was a *real* trustee) to take care of Mary. The visit had no noticeable consequences, although Mrs. Parsons's removal soon afterwards to a better house next door is suggested as having been the result. The change to a place that was more comfortable indicates that Mrs. Parsons had not entirely lost in the encounter with Mrs. Talfourd.

Most likely Mrs. Parsons and Miss James treated Mary as they would have treated a relative of their own. Miss James had been Mary's proved nurse and trusted friend for many years, and she stood sponsor for her sister. Mary had been very happy when she arrived in their circle and she never afterwards recorded any other feeling towards them. Miss James indubitably had education and character. That she burned her letters from Charles Lamb when Talfourd and Moxon were collecting his letters for publication could not have been from ignorance. She told her nephew, John Hollingshead, that she had done it from principle. But the act suggests that Miss James had no special sympathy with Charles Lamb's literary executors, who were at the same time Mary Lamb's guardians.

Mrs. Parsons and Miss James nursed Mary Lamb through her last four months of life, during which she was bedridden. There was nothing that could be done for her now except the last comforting offices. No one else saw her; she no longer knew anyone. Spring came in the orchard beside her windows, but the glorious blossoming evoked no response in the eyes that were at last failing. Mary was hastening to join her brother in the Edmonton cemetery. On the 20th of May 1847 she died, the last of the gifted, baffling, and yet somehow triumphant Lambs.

Her funeral was held eight days later. A stately procession of coaches wended its way through the green countryside. In the carriages were Moxon, Charles Ryle, Talfourd, Crabb Robinson, Thomas Allsop, John Forster, Martin Burney, and an unexplained Mr. Moxshay. The assembled company watched the remains of Mary Lamb descend into the ground to join those of Charles Lamb. When all was done, they went not to the tavern but to the home of the Waldens, where a meal had been prepared for them. The comfortable coaches

then drove back to the city, travelling quickly now over Lamb's dear dusty road to London.

Among this group of mourners two men behaved strictly in character. Martin Burney, the long-loved and feckless friend of Mary Lamb's, shed tears at her funeral. The others looked at him coldly, but the man's tears still fell. He expressed the only personal grief of the occasion. No comment fits so well as Mrs. Gilchrist's feeling utterance: 'Who of us can hope, at eighty-two, still to have warm tears shed into our grave?'

The other characteristic reaction is found in Crabb Robinson's diary, where he wrote that same evening: 'Talfourd it is understood will now relate the whole history of the death of her mother. The second edition of the *Letters* will be a very valuable book.' Robinson had been waiting thirteen years, not impatiently, but intently and correctly, for this great literary moment. Yet he had been sincerely attached to Mary in his own methodical way.

## 6

Mary Lamb had lived long enough to see the Victorian age well under way. Her life span had overlapped the new Queen's reign by ten years. Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, she had spent this decade too far out of the current to realize the great changes around her. The wild days of the Whigs and the gay days of the Regency were over. The ideal of womanhood had shifted a full hundred and eighty degrees. An average, well-conducted young woman, who had made a healthy marriage at twenty-one, was henceforth to set the fashion for her sex. The prestige of Victoria's position gave the pattern she represented a vast compelling force. Women who deviated from it ever so slightly found many superfluous and restraining difficulties in their way as the result. Crabb Robinson's conventional overflowing enthusiasm for the normal girl-Queen was a measure of what such women had to expect.

In the days when Mary Lamb and Sarah Stoddart had sat with their feet on the fender and sipped their brandy and water, things had been socially different. Now it was as if a geological age of culture had been laid down and finished. Goodness had become the style for women; brandy and water, originality and talent, were no longer for them. Correctness and convention

were the means by which they were to survive. Mary Lamb's crime would almost certainly have been punished in the new era. Sarah Hazlitt would not have continued as serenely through life as she did after her sensational divorce. They were gone hence just in time. Both of them had to be decently forgotten, or rather gently bowdlerized, for an ensuing long, long period.

Nor could Charles Lamb and William Hazlitt, the partners of their lives, entirely escape the penalties they had earned by their individual traits. After all, Lamb had reputedly died from drink; and Hazlitt had proclaimed with his last breath his unrepentant radicalism. Such faulty characters were also best forgotten, until at last the impersonal beauty and humanity of their works demanded the vague and subdued restoration of the authors.

Separately and together in their 'dual loneliness', Mary and Charles Lamb stand out as the best symbols of their time. In an age of distinguished women, Mary overcame her untoward fate sufficiently to be clearly recognized among them. In an age when English letters hovered on the verge of becoming humanized, Charles took the most decisive step in that direction. In an age when personality ranked as a talent, singly and together they earned and vindicated an unquestioned place. When the fierce impact of social conditions thwarting and distorting to sensitive minds fell so heavily upon personal lives, they reflected that impact in their own destinies. Yet with all their outer and inner burdens they dropped not by the wayside. They carried the ideal triumphantly and jauntily past all obstacles, leaving behind them, more because of their errors and failings than in spite of them, a legend of wit, wisdom, and love. Their fame still shines out steadily among the bright beacons of their age.

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## *The Writings of Mary and Charles Lamb*

Complete editions of the Works of Charles and Mary Lamb are scarce. In the earlier editions little attempt was made to distinguish between the works of the brother and sister. Mary Lamb's writings were submerged in those of Charles Lamb. Not until the edition brought out by E. V. Lucas in 1903-5 was any systematic effort made to distinguish between their writings and to give to Mary Lamb her due credit as an author.

Among the various editions that have appeared to date the following are given as probably the more available. For obvious reasons, the final edition, edited by E. V. Lucas, is the preferred edition.

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